

This time, Guan Eng is the star of the show
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The initial signs were inauspicious.

Despite the patient and persistent prompting of the emcee, the crowd took its time to file into the spacious Millennium Hall to fill rows and rows of neatly arranged seats.

pakatan 2nd convention 191210 03It looked like the second annual convention of the Pakatan Rakyat in Kepala Batas today was not going to match in enthusiasm and brio the first edition which premiered exactly a year ago at the Shah Alam town hall.

Then, the keenness of large contingents of PKR, PAS and DAP faithful that showed up and early too, was plainly evident, if only to assure themselves that the Common Policy Framework that was to be endorsed at the inaugural convention was not a figment of their imagination.

Students of politics as the art of the possible could be expected to believe that the secularity of the DAP could blend with the theocratic inclinations of PAS - with Anwar Ibrahim's PKR prompting the fusion - to issue a common agenda.

pakatan 2nd convention 191210 04But ordinary folk are not students of the conjuring arts, which explained the awed enthusiasm of the crowd last year at Shah Alam: they wanted to see in the flesh what their imaginations could only perceive - and dimly at that.

In the event, in Shah Alam last year, they were buoyed by what they witnessed, and came away believing that coalition politics not only makes for strange bedfellows, but can generate affection between partners over time, especially if the time was spent enduring adversary-imposed trials.

pakatan 2nd convention 191210 eat cakeA tumultuous year on, after the departure of five MPs from PKR, the exit of a principal architect of the CPF (Zaid Ibrahim), and the relentless attacks of Umno-BN, the shock troops of DAP, PKR and PAS appear a little worn from the troubles they have endured, but a lot more astute.

The way they quickly filled up the Millennium Hall the minute the arrival of coalition grandees was announced by the emcee suggested that they were people who can react expeditiously to the main fare, even if they are a little casual with the entrees.

Penang CM pumps up the adrenalin

However, there was this difference: last year the main fare was Anwar Ibrahim. This time it was Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng.

penang pakatan convention 211110 guan eng speechAs the putative host of the convention, he spoke first. His content and the reception it received showed what a difference a year makes for the Pakatan.

If, in the past, they were overly dependent on Anwar for the rhetorical fireworks, they are

now less so. Guan Eng can pump up the adrenalin with panache.

Guan Eng's speech today was a nice blend of invective, aimed at Umno-BN, and inspirational returning of Pakatan's rallying principles of justice and equality for all, and its agenda of race-blind poverty alleviation.

Whereas last year, Guan Eng had resorted a little too much to Islamic tropes that went on to draw fire from exclusivist Umno, this time the chief minister restrained himself to choice bits, like 'amar maaruf nahi mungkar' (enjoin the good and prohibit the bad), that have now passed into the common coin of public discourse.

Whereas last year, he had declaimed in Mandarin a good length of time, this time he did not say a word in the language, leaving no room for national language chauvinists to target him.

He trumpeted the frugal virtues of his administration, acclaimed by no less than the auditor-general and Transparency International, and held that a vote for Pakatan was a vote for the material betterment of the person at the bottom of Malaysian life's totem pole.

A social democracy in which Malaysia's underclass would be rewarded for their labour and talent was what the DAP secretary-general said was in prospect if at the fast approaching 13th general election, the vote goes the way of Pakatan.

Anwar stays on the sidelines

When PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail rose to espouse the virtues of 'Ketuanan Rakyat' ('People's sovereignty'), and PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang sang the praises of the universalism of Islamic ideals, it appeared all three leaders were vocalising complementary notes from a symphony of hopeful dreams and mutual trust.

The man - Anwar Ibrahim - who set all these notes playing in the breast of Pakatan did not speak at the convention's overture today, perhaps wanting to show the audience that the coalition would not be bereft if, because of Sodomy II, he is temporarily displaced.

If nothing else, today's gathering subliminally signaled that Pakatan is no longer the lengthened shadow of one man.

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