

Is Najib really ready for a shadow cabinet?

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By demanding the opposition to form a shadow cabinet, the government has at last removed any scepticism that there is competing power for Putrajaya.

But this recognition is meaningless if barriers are put up at every single mile towards Putrajaya to thwart the opposition from taking over.

Earlier, Khairy Jamaluddin and now Najib Tun Razak, both being educated in Britain, should not have fallen into this fallacy of demanding the opposition to have a shadow cabinet.

They should have known better to call for such a scheme to be incorporated into the opposition election menu without realising that the Malaysian Parliamentary system barely resembles that of the Westminster model.

Not many will argue the fact that it's resemblance slants more towards form than substance – a counterfeit Westminster model.

Furthermore, bear in mind a very crucial feature for the existence of a real shadow cabinet, that neither Khairy nor Najib fails to or deliberately keeps silent about..

This feature, for example in Britain, allows the opposition leader and his shadow cabinet to have meetings with the government cabinet secretary and other government officials once the Parliament in Britain is dissolved. [Rodney Brazier, Ministers of the Crown, Oxford University Press (1997)]

The cabinet secretary and its officials through these meetings will be alerted and familiarised with the new style of administering the country and the possibility of policy changes should there be a change in government after the general election. [ibid]

This is the most unique feature the opposition in Britain enjoys. This is done so as to have a smooth transition of power if the governing party loses in the general election.

Comparing that with Malaysia, Najib's utterance of 'crushed bodies' and 'lives lost' should the BN lose Putrajaya is analogous to erecting an impregnable wall across the road to Putrajaya.

With the absence of the feature mentioned earlier, coupled with a host of many other elements like the independence of the Election Commission and media freedom, calls for an opposition shadow cabinet is more a philosophical estimation than a feasible one.

What's a shadow cabinet?

The convention of having a shadow cabinet in Britain is not new. From the beginning of the 19th Century toward its end, they were simply known as former cabinet ministers. Until 1880, the word 'former.' was replaced by 'shadow', and hence the shadow cabinet. [ibid]

In Britain, each political party has its own way of forming its shadow cabinet and falls into three groups.

In the first group, the Conservative shadow cabinet ministers are chosen solely at the discretion its leader i.e., the opposition leader. He/she can sack or appoint anyone. [ibid]

But in the case of the Labour Party, it is the Parliamentary Labour Party's standing orders that initiate an election of members to the shadow cabinet. Here the opposition leader has no power to sack any of the members. [5ibid]

And finally the Liberal Democrats' approach: the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Paddy Ashdown, at the beginning of the 1945-5 Parliamentary session created eight Parliamentary Committees, most of which embraced more than one shadow portfolio. [ibid]

And this practice is akin to what Pakatan Rakyat is doing today with the formation of the Parliamentary committee to shadow the government. One can say that it is based loosely on Paddy Ashdown's experience.

At this moment, this is the best option for Pakatan Rakyat because of the trend towards populism where issues are engaged in with fervour.

In the local political scene where race issues are played to the hilt by BN, it would be an advantage for Pakatan Rakyat to have a Parliamentary committee to counter this.

The advantage of a Parliamentary committee is that it can encompass more members of different races and members from outside the Pakatan Rakyat, to expand the intellectual pool so as to counter racism with greater effect.

This is far more productive than engrossing oneself to shadow a huge 'XXL' BN cabinet, that will be a futile and inconsequential undertaking.

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