

Seat negotiations will test Pakatan unity
Malaysiakini.com
July 28, 2011

INTERVIEW It appears that Malaysia's opposition is looking at covering all its bases in anticipation of a snap general election that Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak may call at any time.

With speculation that snap polls could be called as early as November, Pakatan Rakyat has already gone into discussions to determine its candidates for each of the 222 parliamentary seats up for grabs.

DAP adviser Lim Kit Siang (left) said the plan is for Pakatan leaders at state level to finalise their seat negotiations by Sunday (July 31), though he did not discount the possibility that the negotiations may require more time.

What is more significant, however, is how the three Pakatan member parties - PKR, DAP and PAS - iron out their differences and accommodate one another's needs for growth, both within the confines of the coalition and in the broader scope of Malaysian politics.

Lim pointed out that "it is time" for DAP to expand its support base beyond that of majority Chinese areas and urban centres and "reach out" to all Malaysians regardless of race and locality, in line with the party's founding vision.

"That would also be good for Pakatan as a whole, that the DAP will become a more multi-racial party and not just confined to urban areas, so that we are able to reach out to the Malays, Kadazans and Ibans... these are things that we need to work out," he told Malaysiakini in an exclusive interview.

Lim acknowledged that such a pronouncement may at the very least irk their Pakatan colleagues, but avoided delving too deeply into the issue, stressing that the seat negotiations are still being worked out at the state level.

He said leaders at the state level would be the best people to decide on seat distribution among the three parties, as they would be in a "better place to know" the demands and challenges in their respective areas.

"These are things that need to be thrashed out. It's too early at the national level to talk about it, (as) it is still being dealt with at the state level," he added.

The Pakatan leadership, he also said, had asked the various states to address the problems first, to resolve at the state level first, if unable to the problems have to resolved at the national level.

However, he stressed that the preference is for the issues to be sorted out as much possible at the state level.

PR first before individual parties

When pressed further on how far DAP's plans to go into mixed and possibly even Malay-majority seats will impact their relationship with PKR and PAS, Lim played it down though he did admit that it will lead to some "tough discussions".

"But the important thing is we must have a PR mindset. After three years, I think there is a greater awareness that there must be a PR thinking, mindset, not just individual parties; bearing in mind that there was no Pakatan Rakyat in the 2008 general elections.

"(This is) the first time Pakatan is going into a general election as a coalition, as a grouping... at least after three years there is a general feeling (that) there is a need for a greater PR mindset, thinking what is in the best interests of the Pakatan.

"I think (for) seat negotiations and discussions, that element will come in. It wasn't there in 2008 because it was (a case of) individual parties discussing and trying to get the seats they think they can win. Now I think there is (this) extra element which should be seriously considered, which is what is good for Pakatan Rakyat."

On the subject of how the relationship among the three Pakatan parties has developed over the past three years, Lim - not known for indulging in small talk - did not deny it when it was put to him that PKR's strength had deteriorated since 2008 from defections, internal squabbles and the relentless character attacks on PKR de-facto chief Anwar Ibrahim.

Lim, however, deftly sidestepped the question at the same time, implying that all three Pakatan partners are still have teething issues and left with no choice but to deal with them.

"All parties have their own problems. You cannot run away from it. Each party will grow in Pakatan, and contribute to the overall Pakatan Rakyat strength," he said.

Lim pointed out that it had never crossed the minds of Pakatan's top leaders to set up a 'plan B' should Anwar end up incarcerated again over his second sodomy scandal, stressing that the repercussions would be worse for the BN.

"It will create a new political scenario, and people will be more worked up and it will hasten the downfall of Najib and the BN... I won't say it's good for Pakatan, but it may have that effect," he said.

DAP, PAS closer than ever

On the rocky relationship between DAP and PAS, Lim said the formation of Pakatan Rakyat has helped bring the two parties closer as all Pakatan members realise the potential the young coalition has in bringing real change to the country.

He acknowledged that again, there are still some issues that need to be ironed out, particularly at ground-level implementation of common policies set by the Pakatan leadership, but remains optimistic that all in the coalition are able to see the bigger picture.

Lim also denied that he and DAP chairperson Karpal Singh play 'good cop, bad cop' when stating their party's position on issues, saying that it is merely a matter of media perception on their respective choice of words.

Taking the example of the PAS-led Kedah government's initial plan to ratify enactments banning entertainment centres from operating during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan, Lim stated that Karpal had never issued an ultimatum on the issue.

"I was there at the press conference, Karpal never issued an ultimatum to PAS. But of course when it comes out as an ultimatum, it makes things difficult all round... certain BN mainstream media have a political agenda, and they want to create this situation. We are mindful of it."
karpal singh, lim kit siang and hadi awang sibu by-election

Lim said each of the three Pakatan parties is bound to have its own opinion on certain issues, but has faith that their shared commitment in the coalition will help drive them forward.

"I think there's a greater level of understanding for all parties concerned. We have a common interest to make Pakatan work and succeed, that together we can bring about great changes in the country which was unthinkable in the past and I think we don't want to allow this opportunity to be missed.

"Individual parties may have differences on certain questions, but in the larger interest of Pakatan we have to ensure that this does not become an obstacle for Pakatan moving forward or to be exploited," he said.

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