

One candidate, one seat: It's democracy, stupid!
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COMMENT DAP chairperson Karpal Singh must be commended for his recent call to Pakatan Rakyat to practise a "one candidate, one seat" policy.

Karpal Singh at Pakatan convention KedahAt last, one leader in Pakatan has finally spoken up against this undemocratic practise of the party elite monopolising federal and state seats... a lion among the lambs?

When I criticised this practice a few years ago, the "seat grabbers" tried to justify it by saying they could handle both federal and state constituencies: "All you need to do is employ more secretaries to look after the seats for you what," was one pathetic reply.

They failed to see the contradiction and fallacy in this undemocratic practice while criticising the Barisan Nasional for not carrying out democratic reforms.

Democratic reforms begin at home

A Pakatan Rakyat that champions democratic reforms should practise this basic democratic principle within their parties before talking about reforming the country.

"Seat grabbing" of both federal and state constituencies in a general election suggests that the politicians involved are brilliant multi-taskers and that there are too few appropriate candidates within their parties to do otherwise.

Democracy is about people's participation and that means creating opportunities for more, not fewer people to engage in the democratic process of government. Are these politicians actively seeking and nurturing such potential candidates within their party?

Whatever their claimed intention, "seat grabbing" looks like an attempt by the power holders in the party to have as many positions and privileges as they can grab, a case of careerism and opportunism gone mad! It's damn petty bourgeois if you ask me...

The BN, you may have noticed, does not practise such "seat grabbing", not because they are democrats but because they have too many parties to divide the spoils.

Furthermore, compared with the largely petty bourgeoisie in Pakatan, the BN are the bourgeoisie who have the "discreet charm" to forego such cheap thrills of monopolising federal and state seats and go for the bigger economic stakes.

A retrogressive step

It has been mentioned that, now that Pakatan has so many candidates, it should think about implementing the "one candidate, one seat" policy.

In fact, when I was in the Selangor DAP state committee in 1990-95, we already implemented this policy in the early 1990s, much to the chagrin of the power elite at the centre of the DAP.

At that time, they had insisted that a part-time Member of Parliament who kept two medical practices was indispensable in the state as well. Even then, the rank-and-file in the DAP were opposed to power holders in the party monopolising both federal and state seats.

However, this "one candidate, one seat" policy of the Selangor DAP state committee seems to have been rolled back in recent years, obviously through the persuasive arguments by the power elite in the party that these politicians are indispensable at both federal and state levels. This example shows how political reforms can be rolled back with time...

There are other reforms that have not been implemented within Pakatan, including limiting the terms of office of the party leader, a democratic reform that has been achieved by even the retrogressive MCA.

Has the never-ending feudal "dear leader" syndrome any place in a democracy?

Even at the expense of feminism?

Turning to PKR, the same practise has been carried out at the expense of very basic feminist principles. I am of course referring to the abdication of the Permatang Pauh seat by the president of the party, Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, for her husband, Anwar Ibrahim's return to Parliament.

NONEI was not opposed to the idea of forcing a by-election for Anwar to return to Parliament, but it should have been the MB of Selangor or some other ineffectual MP who should have given way for Anwar, not Wan Azizah.

Haven't the menteri besar or the chief ministers of states enough duties on their plate to also want to claim a federal seat?

In this case, we are talking about not just an ordinary woman leader but the president of the party and a possible prime minister of the country in the event of Anwar being imprisoned for Sodomy II.

But how was it that the feminists and the principled politicians in Pakatan did not utter any dissension? It has become a standard feminist demand that there should be a gender quota of women representation in political parties, government office and other institutions.

However, in this case, we have a woman president of the party who had already won her seat in Parliament having to make way for a man!

It's democracy, stupid!

Why do you think this grabby practice of wanting seats in both federal and state legislative bodies not practised in other democratic countries? Do you think it is because they cannot afford to employ political secretaries to look after their constituencies?

It's democracy, stupid! To do so would risk being laughed at by the media and the citizens for being such petty bourgeois careerists!

Democracy is a process that emphasises broad and greater participation of the people and the nurturing of new leaders in the political system. It is about the inclusion of women and young leaders in the exercise of power and decision-making throughout society.

This principle of inclusiveness is crucial. It is not about placing a few token or high-profile women who are more interested in air-brushing their public image either!

The role of women leaders is to push for deeper and more extensive models of democracy and participation for other women.

Thus, selection procedures within parties must be inclusive, transparent and democratic. Various structures such as the women and youth wings should be empowered to enable them to effectively participate in this selection process.

As my example of the Selangor DAP state committee is instructive, intra-party democracy and inclusiveness needs to be sustained. This requires the party to have in place structures and a system that will ensure that all groups are catered for at all times and that reforms cannot be simply undone

If Pakatan fails to carry out such intra-party reform, democracy will continue to be cynically interpreted - as my former comrades in the DAP used to joke about it - "Dia mahu kerusi".

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