

## **Party hoppers must get fresh mandate from voters**

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Recent events have focused on the topic of whether or not there should be restrictions on MPs switching sides.

The recent hopping of Beaufort MP Lajim Ukin and Tuaran MP Wilfred Bumburing has definitely brought back memories of what happened in Perak few years ago.

The former event, together with Lim Guan Eng's proposal of a anti hopping law, has generated much debate from both sides of the political divide.

In this article, I attempt to frame the arguments for MPs to step down and be given a fresh mandate if they intend to switch parties and also try to counter argue against those who disagree with the need to do so.

In 2004, it was clear that the people voted mainly based on national issues. Former premier Abdullah Badawi's message of reform caused major casualties such as Abdul Hadi Awang of PAS and very nearly Karpal Singh of DAP.

These were capable of popular candidates; only through an added emphasis by voters on national issues could they have lost or in Karpal's case, nearly lost.

In the 2008 GE, it was clear that the trend continued.

This is proven by how Nurul Izzah Anwar and Tony Pua, two newbies to the political scene upset established candidates such as Sharizat Abdul Jalil and Chew Mei Fun in the urban seats of Lembah Pantai and PJ Utara, as well as how Michael Jeyakumar beat Samy Vellu in the rural seat of Sungai Siput.

As mentioned earlier, this is a clear indicator that people essentially voted according to party lines. This means that the candidates that are elected are expected to support party stands in Parliament.

Not only that, when issues not discussed during elections come up during their term, the decisions on what stands to take are also the party's to make in our system of representative democracy. The candidate's mandate is to merely to support the party.

When one MP changes parties, this will mean that he/her stands change accordingly.

This is extremely undemocratic as people have not approved this and there is the likelihood that he/she is not representing the constituency's views.

Also there may be ethical issues involved in which he/she may have hopped because position or cash rewards strengthens the case against party hopping.

An anti party hopping law pushes for a by-election to be called and for the people to decide whether they agree with his/her decision and whether or not they should retain him/her despite the ethical issues.

One can argue that if he/she changes parties but maintains his/her stands, a new by-election should not be called.

However, I would have to say that this is unlikely due to the fact that in Malaysia our political parties practice strict toeing of the party line.

An example of such is Tunku Abdul Aziz who claimed that he was forced out from the DAP for failing to agree with the party's stand on Bersih 3.0.

In addition, one must not forget that defections do not merely affect the representation of a few constituencies.

At times, a few defections would mean an entire change in a state government. The Perak Constitutional crisis back in 2009 is an example of this.

A change in the state government is not the most of it. The next election will likely be a closely fought one.

Proof of this is Merdeka Centre's survey which indicated that 49 percent of people were happy with the government, which might mean that almost half of the Malaysians might go for Pakatan Rakyat.

If both parties have close to the same amount of seats after elections, it is highly likely both sides will attempt to tempt MPs over. And this may result in an entire federal government changing due to defections.

One does not need to be a rocket scientist to figure out how bad this is. The government will be one that does not reflect the wishes of the majority. That's how high the stakes are.

Let's take a look at the arguments for party hopping. Wan Saiful Wan Jan, CEO of Ideas was quoted in The Sun stating that if a politician believes that his party is making the wrong stand for the people, it would only be fair to the rakyat if he changes parties.

Another argument that has been circulating is that Malaysians would very soon be voting for the individual candidate and not the party.

Thus, legislation forbidding party hopping would not be needed.

Wan Saiful brings up an excellent point. However, his point is only valid in a situation where the mandate a MP receives is one where people support him according to his own personal stands and he has the mandate to make decisions for them on his own accord.

As has been said, this is simply not the case in Malaysia.

Therefore, if an MP decides that a party's stands are wrong, it is only right for him to resign and for another by-election to be held to make sure of what the people want.

Moving on to the second argument. The truth is that even though surveys people want to start vote based on individuals, there is a significant lack of information for them to do so.

If a voter wants to vote based on candidates stands or track record/CV, he or she requires such information.

This is a problem in Malaysia as there are few newspapers that publish such details. Mainstream and online media like The Star, The Sun, The Malaysian Insider and Malaysiakini report news only on high profile party leaders such as Khairy Jamaluddin and Tony Pua. Lesser known representatives are given little to no attention whatsoever.

Local newspapers such as The Selangor Times are solutions to such a problem. They publicised actions taken and stands by Aduns and local MPs, allowing the people to effectively evaluate the performance of their representatives.

There has to be local newspapers that are neutral as well. Portraying actions and stands of candidates from both sides of the political divide in order for the people to make effective, informative decisions when voting for a candidate based on his record.

The government has also come up stating that such a law would be against freedom of association.

Both Roger Tan and P Ramakrishnan have both written lengthy articles in The Star and Aliran respectively on this point and I would not add much additional value by elaborating further.

Instead, I would like to comment on what should be done if say, an anti-party hopping law is ruled unconstitutional.

The fact of the matter is, even though an MP has the right to associate with different parties, he has the responsibility to make sure that his decision and stands will first reflect that of the people.

Therefore, if formal methods are declared unlawful, the only way would be an informal method. I propose each party's MPs to publicly declare that they would stand for a by-election if they choose to hop.

The party should highly encourage the current term MPs to do so and once the 13th general election concludes, the new MPs as well.

In conclusion, the current need for an anti-party hopping law reflects poorly on us as a democracy.

Malaysia needs to move forward and away from merely voting according to party lines to voting because of individuals.

Voting according to party lines restrict the voices of the people as MPs are tied to the party line and cannot represent the actual views of the people which may at times be at odds with the party he/she represents.

A freer and much increased flow of information as well as a slacker system of toeing the party line is measures that must be taken.

Hopefully when the 14th GE is held, there is no longer need for an anti-hopping law.

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