

PSM and the Goliaths that surround it
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"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

- Hélder Câmara (Dom Helder Camara: Essential Writings)

COMMENT Before I get to the business at hand concerning the current Umno religious provocation on the proposed amendment to Section 107(b) of the Administration of Islam (Federal Territories) Bill 2013, I applaud the stand taken by Deputy Minister P Waythamoorthy and all non-Muslim/Malay (BN) component member who have taken a public stand against this duplicitous amendment.

It remains to be seen if Umno is truly interested in engagement with its partners or they are merely window dressing. However of greater importance is the stand of Muslim/Malay members of Pakatan Rakyat (especially PAS), and there should be a clear and united stand against this "law" (one of many, hopefully) which is the antithesis of everything Pakatan stands for.

NONE If there is, one thing that the political tsunami of 2008 has shown those of us in the oppositional forces in this country is that party candidate trumps "winnable" candidate every time. As PSM's Sungai Siput MP Dr D Jeyakumar (left) said in response to my query on the party's much disputed clenched fist logo: "If it was one to one, pitting the PSM logo against the BN, we would definitely have won Kota Damansara and Jelapang. Probably Semenyih, too, but that would have been close.

"The people in these three constituencies would have voted for the clenched fist logo if they were told by Pakatan that the PSM is an integral part of the anti-BN electoral coalition."

Unfortunately, for a principled and much admired party like PSM, this means that all the grassroots level activism and actual work of improving the lives of the disenfranchised takes a back seat to unseating Umno from Putrajaya and the strategic moves for claiming and retaining power of Pakatan.

Oppositional discourse is dominated by the three power brokers of Pakatan - PKR, DAP and PAS - and minority voices are expected to conform or be confined to irrelevancy. PSM, which has never hidden its ideological imperatives, has been in the words of its national president Mohd Nasir Hashim, "backstabbed" by Pakatan.

I asked the indefatigable Nasir, to describe how exactly Pakatan backstabbed PSM and he emailed me a list of underhanded tricks that would make Carl Rove proud and commented: "PAS' crude campaign surpassed Umno-BN's style. So unbecoming of PAS.

"We were literally on our own and got help from NGO friends. We were not prepared to fight PAS because they are not our principal enemy and our actions were construed as being weak," he said, reflecting on the recently concluded elections.

Five guiding principles

In an email conversation with Jeyakumar, he described the five guiding principles of PSM's engagement in the electoral process, which is as follows:

1. The PSM decided to participate in the elections because we feel that it is an effective way to popularise the party and to build a name for ourselves. Malaysians are still enamoured with elections - just consider the 80 percent odd turnout for GE13. We also feel that we could portray a different kind of politics, and that participating in the electoral process would give us the opportunity to showcase this.

2. The PSM CC (central committee) felt that we had to ally with Pakatan for several reasons:

Pakatan has a better position on corruption, misuse of power, racial politics and repressive laws as compared with BN. Objectively speaking, it is the better choice for Malaysia;

The mere act of replacing BN with Pakatan would emancipate the people from the widespread belief that change is impossible;

The 53 percent of Malaysians who voted opposition in GE13 represent the groups who the PSM would like to win over to a socialist programme over the next few decades. This 53 percent would have been very disappointed with PSM had we decided to stand in three-cornered contests against the BN and the Pakatan as a matter of strategy.

3. The PSM CC felt that we should stand on our own logo to maintain our independence vis-à-vis Pakatan because we have a different long-term vision for Malaysia and it is important that we are not submerged in the much larger Pakatan.

We need to differentiate our "brand" of politics, highlight our rejection of neo-liberalism, etc.

4. The PSM CC felt it would be good to win as many of our seats as possible. This is good for our image. Also good for the morale of the party.

5. The PSM CC felt that all possible efforts should be taken to avoid splits in the party because of electoral tactics. Many Left parties come to grief because of differences in electoral strategy. Party unity we felt, was more important than winning seats.

I found two interesting points about this response. The first being, PSM attempting to differentiate its brand of politics from the mainstream opposition forces of this country and its "long term" goals being "submerged" in the various diverse agendas of Pakatan.

While PSM has never engaged in the confrontational polemics that is the norm of the mainstream opposition entities, preferring instead nuanced arguments and discussion, the reality is that overall there is very little in terms of policies that separates PSM from the mainstream.

PSM secretary-general S Arutchelvan at bar council forum 1As PSM's S Arutchelvan (right) acknowledged in a Malaysiakini interview, "Arutchelvan also stressed that many Pakatan's policies, which are included in the opposition coalition's manifesto, came from PSM's early struggles. 'Issues such as free education and minimum wage, we have brought them up more than five years ago. Pakatan later brought them into its manifesto,' he said."

Demise of Malaysian Left

Now, one may disagree with these policies on an ideological level but the reality is that (and I have no idea if my fellow political commenters would agree with me or not) that as far as PKR and DAP are concerned, they are the very definition of neo-liberal political entities. I will leave aside the racial components of these political parties but the fact remains that populist policies as advocated by Pakatan is in tandem with those of PSM.

This idea of ideological dissonance as promulgated by Pakatan in terms of either symbols or policy is ridiculous, when it comes to the short and mid-range aims of the alternative front.

Singling out a principled party like the PSM for online opprobrium by some very

vocal online partisans and by some very prominent Pakatan leaders is mendacious and an indication of how Pakatan handles diversity in its coalition, which trumpets itself as the coalition, that is inclusive and acknowledges minority voices.

NONE Concerning the cyber war waged by proxies of the mainstream political coalitions, PSM's Arutchelvan, has this to say:

"It is extremely difficult to counter paid cybertroopers but it has to be dealt with. The best way is to silence them by showing them the work we have done rather than just arguing a point.

"Recently we have discussed on forming a team to deal with these issues raised in the cyber mail, as we need to utilise it and engage with it as much besides training party leaders and members on how to successfully counter some of the arguments. I believe that cyber propaganda is here to stay and PSM has to find ways to deal with it rather than ignore it."

The second point that I found interesting, was the good doctor's cognisance of "left parties coming to grief over electoral strategies". In one of my earliest pieces, I lamented the demise of the Left in Malaysia by the machinations of Umno or perhaps more accurately the Alliance and subsequently BN.

In subsequent pieces, I argued that the demise of the Left has had a disastrous effect on the Malay community, which left them at the mercy of either a right-wing monolith like Umno or the religious preoccupations of PAS.

Indeed, I was amused at Hadi Awang's "communist" potshot at PSM considering PAS' history of assimilating socialists' philosophies in its religious struggles. That strain of Leftist thought that manifested in PAS' support of workers unions and engagement with Leftist parties seems like most things in this country conveniently forgotten in an attempt to replicate the Umno success in maintaining hegemony through distortion of history and the destruction of other political perspectives.

NONE I have no idea if PSM continued engagement with Pakatan would bear fruit. As Nasir (right), explains: "We may not be interested to be of equal footing with Pakatan and wish to work on different ground rules whereby power comes from below and not to flirt with capitalist tendencies.

"Our role is to empower the rakyat and to counter poisoned mindsets on race, religion, elitist tendencies and against 'berkiblat kepada penindasan dan pertuhankan kepada peuntungan'."

If PSM is allowed to grow, there is a possibility that class-consciousness would eventually seep into rural communities, especially rural Malay communities that hold the keys to Putrajaya. Harnessing this potential should be one of the avenues explored by the alternative front.

After all, whatever means utilised by PKR and PAS through their "racial reassuring" (sic) and religious pandering has not proved effective in the rural vote banks against Umno. In addition, the DAP has locked down the Chinese vote not to mention the urban vote, hence their target audience is different.

PSM is not advocating anything new in terms of ideology in the Malaysian context; however, they are reviving a spirit of class awareness that should be the pivotal battleground instead of the religious and racial quagmire that both alliances choose to wallow in. In the end, you cannot rely on anti-establishment sentiment forever; eventually people will want to see results on the ground.

For the demographic that could hold the keys to Putrajaya, Pakatan would do well to consider what PSM brings to the table.

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