

For Malaysia's sake, form the shadow cabinet

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COMMENT Prior to the 2008 general election, Pakatan Rakyat could be forgiven for not presenting the country with a shadow cabinet because of the hastily cobbled coalition.

After the 12th general election, there was no excuse for Pakatan not to have a shadow cabinet. Since then, Pakatan's response to the call for the coalition to form a shadow cabinet has never been coherent.

NONEThe 13th general election has come and gone and still they have not presented us with a shadow cabinet.

Their response seems to be that it is their prerogative not to form a shadow cabinet. This is the negative "away from" rather than the "towards" response we would expect of a prospective ruling coalition that more than 50 percent of the Malaysian electorate had voted for in the 13th general election.

And we would have thought that any prospective prime minister would want to promote a shadow cabinet to showcase Pakatan's better quality leaders and policies compared to BN's and through its performance, to give Malaysians even greater faith in an alternative to the BN.

One can guess at the reasons for Pakatan not wanting to commit to a shadow cabinet. The most likely reason is the fear of disgruntled leaders within the coalition creating fissures should they not be chosen or unhappy parties which expect more portfolios.

Thus, they have faceless committees instead of a shadow minister who is accountable to the people.

Another reason is that Pakatan is reluctant to commit to policies that, in their calculations, might cost votes, for example, the annulment of the New Economic Policy; cutting the arms budget; amending the Education Act; an alternative energy policy; a progressive fiscal policy, etc.

So do we have to expect the same fuzzy logic at the 14th general election? How long can Pakatan go on in this fashion, expecting to come to power through the disaffection of Malaysian voters with BN, and forever postponing the expectations of

the rakyat for a credible shadow cabinet?

Accountability and transparency

The people expect accountability and transparency from the government and they also expect the same from the government-in-waiting.

NONE Democratic governments exist only to safeguard the rights of the people. Parliament is meant to ensure that the government fulfills the responsibilities entrusted on it by the people.

A shadow cabinet has to systematically monitor the cabinet in office, to shadow each individual member of the government's cabinet. In a parliamentary democracy, members of a shadow cabinet are appointed to a cabinet position if and when the coalition wins the election and forms the government.

A shadow minister is also expected to have close connections with stakeholders in the relevant fields. This enables him or her to know the sector really well and to apply pressure on the government to solve various problems.

A shadow cabinet makes it easier for the people as well as journalists and others to find appropriate spokespersons from the opposition coalition in a policy debate.

NONE For example, the shadow education minister should be responding at length to the new Education Blueprint right now, but because there is no shadow education minister, Pakatan leaves it to individual MPs to respond.

If no Pakatan leader responds convincingly, there is no one to blame and they can trundle along until the next election.

Thus, the existence of a shadow cabinet brings higher accountability in our parliamentary system of democracy by forcing the opposition coalition to focus on specific areas and present solutions to the people in a satisfactory manner.

Alternative courses of action

Most of the time, issues relating to corruption are raised by Pakatan leaders without their having to offer solutions or alternative courses of action. The most obvious case is in the defence portfolio.

We will never fail to hear of corruption scandals being raised by Pakatan regarding defence procurements, but what are Pakatan's alternative proposals for the defence

budget?

When Pakatan forms the next federal government, will we have more arms fairs, more arms procurements minus "commissions"? Or will Pakatan divert more of the arms budget into social services?

This is what we want to hear from the shadow minister for defence.

Malaysians expect similar alternative policies for every ministry by the shadow cabinet.

The most urgent alternative policy that Malaysians would like to see is a repeal of the New Economic Policy as well as a new Education Policy that promotes real integration, real fairness and is totally committed to excellence.

Through constructive criticism and prudent debate, the opposition can not only win the hearts of the people but also contribute to the development of the country.

An effective and well-informed opposition party is essential for the success of any parliamentary democracy. A fully functioning shadow cabinet can offer such benefits.

It is time for Pakatan to face up to this challenge by naming their shadow cabinet because Malaysians expect one!

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