

Drift's better than specifics in Pakatan ties

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COMMENT Rather than publicly lament the absence of regular meetings of the presidential leadership council, Pakatan Rakyat leaders should take heart that even without them the opposition coalition is still intact.

There's not much point in such meetings if it transpires that what has been agreed at them does not quite hold at crunch-time.

This appeared to have been the case when it was revealed at the height of the Selangor menteri besar crisis earlier this year that in the immediate prelude to Election 2013, top leaders in PAS entertained qualms about endorsing Anwar Ibrahim as the Pakatan prime minister-designate.

This development, occurring just a month before GE13 in May 2013, could not have been startling to the few privy to it, given that as late as the previous November, at the annual PAS muktamar, a delegate from Malacca had urged a round of acclamation for his proposition that president Abdul Hadi Awang be the party's candidate for PM should Pakatan triumph in the approaching polls.

Observers at the muktamar noted no apparent quaver in the chorus of approbation the proposal elicited. And this was not because all present were in wholehearted agreement.

Ideologically regimented parties are wont to behave this way.

But PAS is not an an ideologically regimented party. It is a democratic party with a monolithic superstructure - what the mullahs decree the rest must follow.

But that didn't mean that if the floor at its 2012 muktamar carried an ad hoc motion that Hadi be the Pakatan PM-designate, the whole party trooped in lock-step agreement.

Such are the ambiguities of politics that what might seem proper on the surface may not be true behind the facade.

Until the muktamar, it was settled consensus in Pakatan that Anwar, the PKR de facto leader, was the coalition's PM-designate.

Because PAS chief Hadi (left) had the good grace to deflect the acclamation from the floor at the muktamar, it was felt that nothing untoward had happened to unsettle the Pakatan consensus.

That was the perception but the reality was that five months after the muktamar, some top leaders of the Islamic party sought out Anwar to tell him of their intention to nominate

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah of Umno as their candidate for PM should Pakatan win a parliamentary plurality.

Anwar kept quiet about this disconcerting about-turn on PAS's part and campaigned indefatigably in the last four weeks before the vote to convert the strong groundswell of support for the opposition to parliamentary victory.

In the event, Pakatan garnered 52 percent of the popular vote but only 40 percent of seats in a gerrymandered parliament.

The latter shortfall saw to it that a potential crisis in Pakatan with respect to who was to be PM was avoided.

Fragility of agreements

If anything, the entire episode showed up the fragility of agreements reached at Pakatan presidential meetings or even leadership council meetings, which are the meetings when 10 top representatives from each component sit down to discuss matters.

Yet that PM-designate contretemps and the eight-month long crisis in Pakatan earlier this year stemming from PKR's attempt to replace Khalid Ibrahim as menteri besar of Selangor have not seen Pakatan crack up as a coalition.

Why? Because each component is convinced that in the aggregate the coalition is incontestably stronger than its individual parts.

Moreover, each component is certain that Umno-BN cannot reform in order to recover declining popularity among voters; the latest conclave of the dominant component of the ruling coalition is proof of their obscurantism.

Furthermore, escalating national debt and a lack of will to undertake the unavoidably unpopular measures to extricate the country from it will ensure Umno-BN's expiry, perhaps even before outright voter rejection factors in.

Therefore what sense is there in sundering or departing an opposition coalition when the ruling competitor is at a dead end?

Still, uncertainty about the exact details about the concordat between the Pakatan components and persistent doubts as to PAS's willingness to abide by assumed agreements, such as the Common Policy Framework (CPF), is not the way to go about building the confidence of voters in the coalition as a government in waiting.

But the reverse situation wherein agreements arrived at and later set aside by diktat of a recalcitrant or squeamish few in a component party promotes all-round cynicism about the nature of the concord holding Pakatan together.

But operatives schooled in the Edmund Burkeian wisdom that politics rarely, if ever, throws up choices other than that between the undesirable and the intolerable will hold that a certain ambiguity about Pakatan's goals is preferable to general cynicism about its intent.

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