

DAP-PKR: The unspoken fear
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A news report quoted Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) vice-president Dr Lee Boon Chye as claiming that DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng is attempting to create a split in the PKR top leadership.

According to Lee, whose comments appeared on the front-page of Oriental Daily News today, Lim (photo) is doing this to 'achieve his objective of degrading' the image of PKR's Chinese leaders.

"PKR practices collective leadership and its top leaders of all races share equal rights in strategising and decision-making," said the vice-president.

He was responding to reports quoting Lim as saying that his Chinese-predominated DAP will only discuss the issue of opposition candidacy for the upcoming Machap by-election with PKR advisor Anwar Ibrahim and president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

Previous media reports revealed that both DAP and PKR wanted to field their own candidates for the opposition. It is learnt that PKR has now decided to give way to DAP in contesting the by-election to make it a straight fight between the opposition and the ruling BN coalition.

Still, public disputes between DAP and PKR are not new.

'Traditional territories'

Since PKR was inaugurated in 1999, DAP has been on guard against the encroachment of its 'traditional territories' by the non-Malay, especially Chinese, segment in PKR.

Although DAP was founded in 1966 on a multiethnic principle, it is still predominantly Chinese-based with some Indian participation.

With the passing or departure of Malay leaders like former trade unionist Ahmad Nor, it has virtually no Malay leaders at the national and state levels. It is unclear whether there are still Malay grassroots members in the party.

With the advent of PKR, the prospect of DAP recruiting and sustaining a credible Malay leadership and membership has become even slimmer. This is because Umno, PAS and PKR provide an almost complete range of political and ideological options for Malay participation in politics.

In other words, DAP can only hope to hold on to its non-Malay - namely Chinese - base.

Even then, some political observers have detected a worrying phenomenon.

DAP seems to have also alienated a significant number of hardcore Chinese opposition supporters and voters as the combined results of its incessant factional or sectarian infightings, failure to reconcile with the older generations of the Chinese-educated Left

which boosted the party's standing in the community in the 1990 general elections and its inability to retain a middle-aged echelon of socially experienced leaders.

On the other hand, with Anwar's release from prison, PKR has not only firmed up its Malay base but also increased its appeal among non-Malay communities with its image of being a moderate centre between the nationalist Umno and Islamist PAS.

'Chinese partner'

So, DAP's unspoken fear is that while it can no longer hope to recruit Malays into its leadership and membership, the Malay-majority PKR has been able to absorb many non-Malays into its rank and file.

In other words, while DAP is stagnant or declining in its appeal of multiethnic inclusiveness, PKR is expanding.

Although it can be argued that for PKR's non-Malay wing to be as strong as DAP's, there is still a long way to go.

The short-term or immediate response from DAP is to quickly and effectively craft a niche for itself as 'the Chinese partner' of the 'Malay segment' in PKR just like it did with the mono-ethnic Malay opposition party Semangat 46 in the 1990s.

Following this line of strategic thinking, it logically leads to the observation that it is to DAP's interest of self-preservation to befriend and cooperate with only the 'Malay segment' in PKR which is mutually complimentary while covertly blocking or suppressing the growth of the party's non-Malay, especially Chinese, base.

Ultimately, the relationship between DAP and PKR depends on whether PKR holds firm to its founding principle of being an inclusively multiethnic party or a Malay organisation with a disposable or expendable Chinese appendage, or a Malay mirror-image of DAP.

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