

**Whither PKR's multiracialism?**  
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Given the centrality of ethnic politics in Malaysia leading to the historical and contemporary ethnic and religious divide between Malays and non-Malays, opposition parties, especially the Malay-based ones, are finding it difficult to steer clear of this divide in charting a truly multi-racial trajectory for all Malaysians.

Parti Keadilan and later Parti Keadilan Rakyat as a result of the merger with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) were formed to challenge the authoritarian rule of former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad by adopting a multi-racial platform. Although initially, the party was more concerned about obtaining justice for its advisor Anwar Ibrahim, however, by the 1999 elections, the party had adopted a broader political perspective to provide an alternative formula to Malaysians.

In facing the 1999 elections, Keadilan joined forces with PRM, DAP and PAS to wrest political control from the Barisan Nasional (BN). While PAS was the beneficiary of the contest, the electoral pact was quite damaging to DAP. Following the election, DAP withdrew from the opposition coalition Barisan Alternatif (BA) by severing ties with PAS, although it maintained friendly relations with Keadilan and PRM.

In the 2004 election, DAP was able to regain the support it lost in the 1999 elections. However, in both the general elections, Keadilan, despite its multi-racialism, was not able to gain votes, with the exception of one parliamentary seat in Penang.

In a subsequent development, Keadilan merged with PRM to form Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) to the disappointment of some segments of PRM supporters, especially in Johor.

It is lot more easier for ethnic parties to operate in Malaysia than a political party that professes multi-racialism. PKR, despite the odds against it, has been able to hold together when its mentor Anwar was in jail. Now with Anwar released and playing a more prominent role in the affairs of the party, PKR has the potential to play a significant role in the politics of Malaysia.

It has the potential to provide an alternative non-racial political formula for Malaysians, especially those who have become sick and tired of racism, religious bigotry, corruption and money politics. More than this, PKR is the only opposition political party that can bridge the historical enmity between DAP and PAS.

### **Malay mind-set**

While PKR has made important contributions to Malaysian politics, the party still remains entrapped with a Malay mind-set that seems to confuse the party over the larger and more fundamental multi-racial question. Major decisions of the party are defended on the basis of multi-racialism, but then this brand of multi-racialism as practiced by the party seems to favour only members of one ethnic group - the Malays.

It is understandable that the majority of the members and the main party leaders will emanate from the Malay community, this is Malaysian political reality. However, when it

comes to fielding candidates in by-elections, the party seems to field only Malay candidates in areas that have large Indian voters. It is not necessary for the party to follow the pattern established by the BN, but certainly there is some merit for the party to provide some space for Indian candidates in areas where there are substantial Indian voters.

Indians within PKR and outside have been concerned that in the by-election in Lunas and Teluk Kemang in 2000, it refused to field Indian candidates. In both these places, BN in the spirit of cooperation with MIC, fielded Indian candidates. However, PKR prioritised winning and disregarded the sentiments of the Indian community. It failed to utilise some of its capable leaders in both Lunas and Teluk Kemang. In Lunas, some of the overzealous members of PKR are also known to have hurled racist remarks against the Indian MIC candidate. It is doubtful whether the leadership of PKR has taken to task those responsible for the racist remarks and abuses that were made.

In the case of both Lunas and Teluk Kemang, it is apparent that PKR only preached multi-racialism but never practiced. If PKR cannot field Indian candidates in areas like Lunas, Teluk Kemang and later in Ijok, areas of large presence of Indian voters, then it would be impossible for PKR to field Indian candidates in other areas where Indian presence is rather small or minuscule.

### **Ijok by-election**

The by-election for Ijok will be held on April 28. This is a traditional MIC area and according to practice, the BN candidate will be an Indian. The menteri besar of Selangor has rejected demands from Umno to field a Malay candidate. But again, PKR is a multi-racial party and it cannot make electoral calculations in accordance with the practice of BN. But then, we would like to know why the party wants to field a Malay candidate and on what basis?

Why is the party not keen on fielding an Indian candidate? Is it because the party cannot locate a capable Indian leader or is it because it does not want to disappoint PAS? Apparently, PAS has made it known to PKR that it would only support a Malay candidate and not a non-Malay one. This kind of attitude on the part of PAS clearly reveals the hypocrisy and contradictions of PAS, a supposedly universal champion of Islam.

If PKR prioritises winning in Ijok by placing a Malay candidate, then there is no strong evidence to indicate that a Malay candidate fielded would be able to win. Furthermore, there is no evidence to indicate that an Indian candidate would lose the election. Given this, it appears that PKR and some of its leaders have succumbed to the cheap thrill of racism at the expense of its multi-racial slogan. The possible decision to deny an Indian candidate seems to represent the continuing practice of PKR to deny Indians an opportunity in the party to contest in elections.

Well, if this is going to be the scenario, it would be difficult for Indians to have confidence in PKR as a truly multi-racial party. Alternatively, PKR will emerge as an opportunistic political party that outwardly preaches multi-racialism, but its deeds are no different from Umno and other racist parties.

The most hardworking Indian members in PKR are those who are Tamil educated and of the working class background. Given the divide among Indians in PKR on the basis of those who are Tamil and non-Tamil speaking, it would be difficult for Indians in the party to articulate with one solid voice.

The non-Tamil speaking leaders are professionals and supposedly closer to the top leadership, but not necessarily do these leaders have the empathy and understanding of the larger working class Indian community. These English-speaking individuals tend to go along with the top leadership and it does not make any difference to them if Indian candidates are shunned in elections. However, the Tamil speaking grassroots leaders are unhappy and agitated that PKR leadership is continuing to sideline Indian leaders in the party.

It is understandable that BN in general and Umno in particular do not protect the minorities in the country. It is not understandable why opposition parties like PKR continues to sideline ethnic minorities in the country. Anwar has provided much hope for Malaysians to think along an alternative path to politics, but it is not clear that his ideas have not filtered down the party. It is rather sad and tragic that PKR has not changed very much from the days of Lunas.

Ijok will be another tragic event for the party if it does not address the problem of Indian participation and contest.

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