

Changing but still remaining the same
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Chan Chee Khoon

Dr Toh Kin Woon is well-known as Gerakan party's maverick politician, having done yeoman (and thankless) service as the 'social democratic conscience' of the junior member of the Barisan Nasional (BN) ruling coalition. MCPX

In the wake of the BN's electoral debacle on March 8, the party founded by Dr Tan Chee Khoon, Prof Syed Hussein Alatas, Dr Lim Chong Eu, V David and others, is stirred to show some spine after being sternly rebuked by the Malaysian electorate amidst accusations of having acted as a self-serving quisling collaborator in a corrupt, repressive and racist regime.

Toh has discussed elsewhere Gerakan's potential future trajectories, suggesting as one option that 'it could, for instance, join forces with other like-minded parties outside BN to forge an even larger multiracial movement for greater democracy, ethnic equality, gender parity and social justice'.

Before it deserted its social democratic turf shortly after its formation in 1968, Gerakan's founding philosophy was almost indistinguishable from the current PKR and DAP party lines: positive discrimination in favor of the socially disadvantaged, regardless of race. In the current fluid and rapidly evolving political situation, PKR and to quite an extent, PAS, are playing vital roles as Malay-led parties steadfast in their carefully-worded consistent rejection of the substance, if not the rhetoric, of the 'actually existing' NEP.

It's an intriguing ideological brew, a 'Malaysian Economic Agenda' blended with PAS' vision of an Islamic welfare state. We might well ask if we are not witnessing the emergence of social democracy lite, with an Islamic flavor? (As a health policy analyst, I have examined the PAS health platform in its 2008 electoral manifesto, which favours a reinvigoration and expansion of publicly-financed and publicly-provided healthcare, and find it more appealing than the corresponding PKR health platform, which favors health vouchers in an economic sub-sector well-known for its proneness to inefficiencies and market failures).

'Islamic social democracy' as the substance of an alternative Barisan Rakyat? Before we get carried away ('ultimate power lies with the electorate'), let's be reminded that both BN and the new state governments have moved quickly to re-assure local and foreign investors of the continuity of business-friendly policies, regardless of changes in the executive:

How to deal, pragmatically, with structural constraints and structural (systemic) power, in managing a globally embedded national (or state) economy? The newly installed Selangor menteri besar Khalid Ibrahim has already been challenged to match his rhetoric with his deeds. How to balance property rights vs rights to well-being (and housing)? National interests vs migrants' (human) rights to equitable treatment and well-being?

I'm not suggesting that PKR, DAP, or PAS should be business-unfriendly. Nonetheless, 'smart partnerships', 'win-win situations' and positive spin aside, one can anticipate further tensions between aspects of their populist manifestoes (minimum wage, cost of living and price controls, an expanded welfarist state, etc) and the priorities of the business and investing community, both local and foreign.

In any case, there are global economic forces and geopolitical trends, volatile financial and energy markets, etc that are largely beyond the control of a national government, whether under the BN or an alternative coalition.

It's early days, and one doesn't want to be a wet blanket and prematurely spoil the honeymoon. So we should perhaps stand down momentarily for a patient watch to see what balance might emerge between 'Islamic social democracy' and ... 'Islamic third way' ?

But vigilance is nonetheless essential. It's not for no reason that the French had a saying: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose (the more things change, the more they remain the same).

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