

Defections : why Pakatan should wait
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comment With the uncertainty within Umno increasing by the day, speculation is rife that the de facto leader of the newly-formed Pakatan Rakyat, Anwar Ibrahim, is ready to pounce and entice a sufficient number of BN MPs to allow the Pakatan to form a new government.

pas pkr dap pc barisan rakyat coalition 010408 02While such a development might be welcomed by those who have been longing for the BN to finally lose power, such haste is not a wise move for a variety of reasons.

Asking BN MPs to cross over to Pakatan sets a bad precedent for democratic accountability in Malaysia. Voters in Malaysia, by and large, vote for the party rather than the candidate and it is highly unlikely that they would approve of their candidate switching camps after being voted into office.

To the BN's credit, it did not 'incentivize' any PAS assemblymen from the state of Kelantan even after PAS' majority in the state assembly was decreased to just one following BN's capture of Pengkalan Pasir in a by-election in 2005. This, despite the fact that taking back Kelantan was an important goal for the BN.

More recently, it was speculated that some Opposition state assembly representatives in Perak would be approached to switch camps after the Opposition won the state by a thin majority. As it turned out, the DAP-PKR-PAS alliance was allowed to form the government in that state.

Some may argue that in both Kelantan and Perak, nothing happened because the BN was simply unsuccessful in enticing the opposition politicians to cross over. There's no way of knowing whether this is indeed the case, but the fact is the phenomenon of party hopping has not happened. It has not been a feature of politics in Malaysia for some time now and that's a good thing.

Seducing politicians to party-hop now would be reminiscent of what the BN shamelessly did in Sabah after the PBS won a two-seat majority in the 1994 Sabah state elections. This was a time when Dr Mahathir Mohamad was the prime minister and Anwar was his deputy.

Don't use BN's dirty tactics

A mass migration of 30 or more BN MPs today would mean Pakatan could no longer maintain the moral high ground as it would be guilty of employing the dirty tactics used by BN during the Mahathir years. It would also spark a vicious cycle, encouraging the BN to employ similar tactics in the future.

It's also important to also ask: Exactly what kind of MPs would you be attracting? The progressives? The liberals? The reformists?

parliament 2008 numbers and percentage of seatsThe ones who switch over now would not be doing so because of idealism or because they suddenly have a change of heart over issues like the ISA (Internal Security Act), press freedom, the NEP (New Economic Policy)

and so on. They would be doing so because of what they can squeeze out of Pakatan, for example, a cabinet position in a new government.

How would this be received by the rank and file within the Pakatan parties? And how would the voters perceive these former BN crossovers being elevated to senior positions within the new government?

Lastly, party-hopping would go against the grain of an earlier desire expressed by the DAP to introduce an anti-hopping law. PAS has also indicated that it would support such a law. Indeed, it is in the interest of all political parties in Malaysia to introduce a change in the electoral law which calls for a by-election if an elected representative decides to change his or her political allegiance.

It would be much wiser for the Pakatan to concentrate on governing the five states which it currently controls and to show voters that it can govern at the state level effectively. It would give DAP and PKR a chance to gain some experience at governing, even if it is only at the state level. This experience is something which currently only PAS has got.

By playing the role of a loyal opposition, at least for now, Pakatan can find its feet and learn what it is like to work as a united team through the formation of a shadow cabinet, for example. By showing that they can indeed work together as a coalition, it will only increase the voter's confidence that Pakatan is a government-in-waiting rather than a temporary opposition alliance of convenience.

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