

Lessons for PAS in democratic politics
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It has become a political tradition for the performance of a government to be evaluated once it has been in power for a period of some three months or 100 days.
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This is usually taken as the time required for the new administration to bed itself in; problems encountered before this time has elapsed can often be conveniently attributed to the previous regime. The same is broadly true of new opposition regimes as well.

barisan rakyat pakatan rakyat pkr dap pas leadersBut 100 days after Malaysia's new opposition coalition secured control over four more state governments, its main success appears to be in holding together as a united coalition for this length of time.

Although most comments about the opposition coalition's performance centre on promises made in their election manifestos, it is a fact that their durability as a coalition, now renamed Pakatan Rakyat, is also a centre of attention.

So is the fact that the opposition coalition is more unlikely to survive in the long term than the Barisan Nasional led by Umno. The reasons are not only absence of a strong party in the coalition, but also opposing ideologies and extreme standpoints held by various components of the coalition.

The coalition consists of PKR led Anwar Ibrahim, PAS and the Chinese-based DAP, a party which not only champions non-Muslim rights but has also been unabashed about its intent to "de-Islamise" what little semblance of Islamic identity is left in the legal, government and education systems.

By contrast, the PKR calls itself a multiracial party, and it has often been forced to compromise between the two opposing parties. Yet it has been less accommodating to PAS's Islamic ideology, especially because the swing of non-Muslim votes is one which must be carefully juggled so that it will not drop for at least the next five years.

Such is the case judging by the many statements its leaders rush to make to assuage the panic of those who are wary of PAS's stance on Islamic state and other issues.

malaysia general election vote ballot partiesThe fact is that the strange bedfellows woke up on March 9 and found themselves forced to stick together to deny Umno the opportunity to form a number of state governments. They decided to concentrate on issues on which they can meet each other half-way without compromising their party identity.

As the 100th day approached, that unifying glue appeared stronger: Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced a 40 percent increase in petrol prices, arguing that the global increase in oil-production costs means that the government can no longer subsidise it for Malaysians.

Delicate accommodation

But the glue threatened to melt over a small controversy. A group of PAS leaders had planned to protest against a pop concert featuring female singers before the start of the annual Selangor Sultan's football-cup match in Shah Alam. They questioned the necessity of such open concerts, provided mainly for Malay-Muslim youths, at a time when moral and social problems are increasing.

Whether the protest was genuinely made out of concern for principles and ethics, or to assuage growing criticism in the grassroots about PAS' weakening grip on its *raison d'être*, Islam, cannot be said with any certainty. Yet either way, it is symbolic of PAS's predicament.

The PAS youth leaders' opposition, however, was virtually ignored by the coalition, including government members from PAS, who refuse to be drawn into any debate which can further rip apart an already delicate accommodation.

selangor dun webcast 210508 sultanTo add insult to injury for PAS, the Selangor sultan, a constitutional monarch whose position, among others, is as head of the Islamic religion and Malay culture, openly criticised PAS supporters for threatening to stage a protest at the concert venue.

He defended the concert as suitable for family entertainment, and called on PAS to respect the wishes of a multiracial society. This is despite the fact that the pop singers are Malays, and any such concerts are likely to attract only Malay-Muslim youths.

The controversy, however, could be the beginning of a long-awaited lesson in democracy and the pains that come with it for a party that has been fighting for a greater role for Islam in Malaysia's public life. It may also be the beginning of a deeper intellectual emancipation of the leaders of PAS, an organisation which has hitherto identified itself with the global Islamic movement despite all the mistakes that it repeatedly commits.

While PAS' refusal to talk about an Islamic state is understandable, its ideology was never meant to enable it to work with any one who might give it a position in government. That it has difficulty speaking out against actions it thinks un-Islamic by the very government it is part of, lays bare its vulnerability to democratic propaganda and sleight of tongue.

Split in PAS?

Another important lesson that perhaps PAS leaders have paid less attention to is its over-dependence on the country's feudal set-up. PAS has long been staunchly loyal to the sultan and the sultanate. It remains to be seen whether a wake-up call is recognised by PAS as a warning against placing hope on institutions which are vestiges of colonial rule.

Such methods have failed in Turkey, where Islamist parties have played such a game for far too long. A commitment to break free from the argument that 'one can bring about change from within when one is at the top' is a process towards maturity that is awaiting PAS' leadership.

PAS may be the biggest loser in terms of sacrificing its commitment and identity so as not to offend the sensitivities of its fellow coalition members. Yet it is also true that PAS, electorally speaking, is the kingmaker - its withdrawal from the coalition could spell the end of Pakatan state governments in Perak and Selangor.

umno and pas negotiate 031207But reliable sources within PAS have said that a clear split is emerging in the party, one supporting the present political understanding it has with Anwar as the prime minister of choice, and the other opposed to Anwar's leadership but advocating cooperation with Umno for the sake of preserving Malay political power, which has somewhat eroded because of Umno's absence in Malay-majority state governments.

Dealing with these differences will be a more delicate affair than how it engages with some non-Muslims in the coalition who have traditionally been strongly opposed to PAS.

It will not be easy, especially when Anwar has been sending strong signals that he will be toppling the present government by means of defections from the ruling party. Whether it is true or not is a closely guarded secret among Anwar's close loyalists. One question is whether PAS leaders would want to risk losing the spoils of power whenever the present ruling coalition collapses.

PAS' over-dependence on electoral politics should now be re-examined. Its participation in the present state governments should be enough for it to try to bring changes that it once could only dream of. If it tries to do so, it will soon find that it has not been doing the homework it could have done when it had free time on its hands in opposition.

With so much to think about after only 100 days, one can expect a lot more fireworks over the next five years.

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