

**Cracks show up in opposition ranks**  
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That opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim can draw the crowds in spite of fresh allegations of sodomy levelled against him was proven at last week's massive anti-fuel price hike rally. But cracks are showing up in the hurriedly-formed three-party opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition.

MCPX

Will Pakatan last or will it break up under the stress of the radically different ideologies of its three main partners?

An incident at the anti-fuel hike rally is indicative of the tensions within Pakatan, a coalition consisting of Islamic PAS, Chinese-dominated DAP and Anwar's Malay-led PKR, which professes a liberal democratic ideology.

carburetor dung lewd performance at protes fuel price hike rally mppj stadium 070708 01As part of the protest, a rock singer showed his buttocks, angering the puritanical Islamists and resulting in a punch-up. The band was escorted out, the Islamists calmed down and the programme continued. But the incident showed tension within the alliance cobbled together by Anwar two weeks after the March 8 general election, which saw the ruling coalition giving ground to the opposition parties.

The opposition coalition - really a marriage of convenience - won 82 of the 222 seats in parliament and won five of the 13 states in the federation, giving it a huge voice in a society dominated by the monolithic Umno since independence in 1957.

"The cracks are beginning to show and indicate how difficult it is to sustain an alliance when there is no common ideology and no common agenda," said an academic with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia who did not want to be named.

protes fuel price hike rally mppj stadium 070708 34"While the Islamists pull the alliance one side, the secularists are taking it in the opposite direction."

"Mr Anwar is caught in the middle trying to satisfy the two powerful political forces that each represent opposite sides of our society," the academic told IPS.

What unites the opposition is a common wish to see the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi end, but for widely differing reasons.

**For PAS, Malaysia not Muslim enough**

The PAS party's ambitions have always been to set up an Islamic theocracy, but it was strategic enough to put these on the backburner to help forge a united opposition against the government. But with the elections over, the agenda has resurfaced.

PAS has openly demanded that the five opposition-ruled states give prominence to syariah laws. In addition, it wants state government policies to be in tune with Islamic practices.

For PAS the country is not Muslim enough, and the party is constantly pressing for the introduction of such measures as an Islamic dress code, a ban on alcohol consumption and gambling and close regulation of Muslim behaviour.

Such demands bring it into conflict with moderate Muslims who provide backbone support for Anwar's PKR and who do not wish to see the country sliding into Islam-driven conservatism, which they see as a dangerous and negative trend in a multi-ethnic polity like Malaysia.

protes fuel price hike rally mppj stadium 070708 36To complicate matters further, the mainly Chinese DAP is highly suspicious of PAS and its agenda, and since the March 8 general election some DAP leaders have been questioning the ambiguity of Anwar on key issues like religious freedom and syariah laws.

Worst, the fresh sodomy allegations foisted on Anwar have roiled the opposition and clouded its chances of winning state power through engineering defections from ruling coalition ranks.

Anwar's focus has shifted from toppling the government to surviving the new accusations which, although rejected as false by most Malaysians, are nevertheless serious as police investigations widen to include nearly 36 witnesses, indicating a full-blown inquiry is under way.

Anwar has warned the government to drop the charges or face mass public protest. He has set off on a nationwide tour this week to defend his innocence before the people in a campaign that's end result is yet uncertain.

### **Enough of politicking**

"The public mood is sympathetic to Anwar but people are also increasingly unhappy with the constant politicking surrounding Anwar," the academic said. "People want the opposition to end politicking and start governing the five states won by them."

Criticism is beginning to surface against the opposition in letters to newspapers, in blogs and in Internet chat rooms.

One letter in the New Straits Times daily on July 8 captured the growing public unease.

"The opposition parties have failed to show signs that they know how to govern," said writer CK Looi. "They are still campaigning although the election ended on March 8."

"They spend their energy engineering defections and not exercising the mandate the people have given them," he said, echoing the views of many Malaysians who disagree with Anwar's plan of soliciting defections.

"The opposition does nothing but gripe, gripe and gripe, failing to realise that they are the government in five states," he said. "They are wasting away a golden opportunity to prove they can govern effectively and implement the fundamental reforms the country so urgently needs."

### **Pace of reforms agonisingly slow**

Although weakened nationally and facing challenges within Umno, Abdullah has put reforms back on track within the first 100 days of his being returned for a second term, though with drastically reduced clout.

umno special briefing abdullah ahmad badawi announce resignation date 100708 05He has also announced a new broad-based anti-corruption commission to oversee the Anti-Corruption Agency and an independent Judicial Appointment Commissions to return credibility to the battered judiciary.

However, these and other measures have slowed down and face serious opposition from the remnants of the old regime that still populate Abdullah's cabinet, the large political establishment and the bureaucracy.

"Malaysia needs fundamental changes to the system not a change of systems," said Ramon Navaratnam, president of the Berlin-based Transparency International's Malaysia chapter.

"Reforms are badly needed and Abdullah is giving it priority but the pace is agonisingly slow," he said.

"He must speed up the pace, set deadlines to achieve reforms and put credible individuals in charge of the reformed institutions like the police and the judiciary."

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