

OPINION: For the DAP it's once bitten, twice shy
Chow Kum Hor
January 18, 2006
New Straits Times

Jan 14: Despite toying with the idea of strategic alliances and cooperating with other Opposition parties, the DAP is likely to go it alone in the next elections, writes CHOW KUM HOR.

PICTURE Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim addressing the Democratic Action Party top brass in a retreat, throw in the element of secrecy surrounding the meeting and it won't take long for speculation about the party reviving formal ties with other Opposition parties to gain a foothold.

Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) information chief Tian Chua may have added to the rumour mill when he told the Chinese newspapers that Anwar, the PKR adviser, had called on the DAP to forge an Opposition alliance during his speech.

DAP leaders, including secretary-general Lim Guan Eng, have denied that Anwar even broached the subject during the latter's 20-minute talk in Cameron Highlands last weekend.

"But we are open to co-operation with any party which does not have the setting up of an Islamic State as its agenda," says Lim.

Despite the semantics about whether "co-operation" is preferable to "coalition", the truth is DAP leaders are now deeply wary about how even the slightest link with other Opposition groups could affect the party.

After all, the DAP walked out of the Opposition Front (better known by its Malay acronym, BA) in 2001, following disenchantment with fellow coalition member Pas over the latter's insistence on setting up an Islamic state.

This came about after the DAP's dismal showing in the 1999 general election, where even its traditional supporters deserted the Chinese-based party faster than Karpal Singh could repeat his infamous "over my dead body" remark. (Karpal had made the comment in 1990 on Pas' plans to set up an Islamic state.)

The party's decision to go solo in the 2004 poll paid off when it won 12 parliamentary seats, making it the largest Opposition party in the Dewan Rakyat.

Lim Kit Siang was reinstated as Opposition Leader while Karpal also returned to the legislature after their defeat five years earlier.

But has the party, by even toying with the idea of co-operation with other Opposition parties, forgotten the bitter lesson of 1999 when it suffered its worst-ever electoral performance?

Those in favour of some form of arrangement with other Opposition parties argue that the situation has changed considerably since then.

PKR vice-president Azmin Ali, who was invited with Anwar to Cameron Highlands, says the PKR has publicly asked Pas to reconsider its platform if Pas is serious about winning over the Malaysian public.

"Pas has not been raising the Islamic state issue for some time now. In fact, Pas has started to moderate its image after the last general election. It is a non-issue at the moment," he says.

The argument goes that if the prickly issue of an Islamic state is out of the way, DAP would have no problem fighting alongside Pas in the next general election.

But Pas' re-branding exercise, to shed its hardline Islamic image in favour of a more moderate one, still falls short of the DAP's demand that Pas drop its Islamic state stance.

Even the most optimistic DAP leader does not see Pas abandoning its Islamic state objective, which has formed one of the party's core principles.

The Merdeka Centre think-tank's Ibrahim Suffian says there are also lingering trust issues between the DAP and Pas, especially after the debacle over BA's 1999 manifesto.

The common manifesto was silent on the setting up of an Islamic state but no sooner had the general election been concluded than Pas was back to insisting that it would set up an Islamic state if it came to power. But for PKR, some form of understanding with the DAP could alleviate the problem of both parties contesting in the same constituency — a phenomenon that resulted in split Opposition votes in 2004 in some areas.

As much as PKR needs to extend its base beyond the Malay ground, DAP also wants to shed its Chinese-centric image as a long-term strategic move.

"There are also people in the DAP who take a long view of the party," says Ibrahim.

"With dwindling Chinese-majority seats, the DAP has to look at co-operation with other parties for its long-term survival.

"It cannot continue to be boxed up as a Chinese party."

While DAP leaders such as Lim have not ruled out ties within the Opposition, political reality suggests that they stand to gain more as a "niche party". The experience in 1999 has taught the DAP that the groundswell, which saw the Opposition as a whole making significant inroads, may not necessarily benefit the party.

In fact, DAP took a severe beating.

A DAP insider says the poll was a wake-up call for the party to stay true to its principles of defending the 1957 Constitution, instead of working with a party with the expressed aim of setting up an Islamic state.

"It is pointless for the party to think long-term (on matters such as forging links with Malay-based parties) if in the short term, the party cannot even stay afloat by winning elections," he says.

Emerging wiser from the lesson, the party appears to have adopted the "DAP-first" mentality, as opposed to "Opposition first".

As for Anwar, a DAP central executive committee (CEC) member says: "Between the DAP and Pas, I believe Anwar, with his Islamic background, is more inclined towards Pas, notwithstanding his rhetoric about asking the party to review its Islamic state position.

"He needs the Malay-Muslim platform more.

"His support base has always been this group of people. Personally, I think we have to tread carefully."

Lim says there are many issues to be thrashed out before the DAP moves towards forming an alliance — loose or otherwise — with other Opposition parties.

But the underlying principle is that the "partner" must not have the setting up of an Islamic state as its objective.

"We want a coalition of substance, not convenience. We do not want political spins."

But would DAP agree to an alliance with PKR and not Pas? In the 1990 and 1995 polls, the DAP and

Malay-based Semangat 46 were under the Gagasan Rakyat coalition.

Semangat 46, on the other hand, joined forces with Pas and other Islamic parties in another Opposition coalition, the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (APU).

Although Lim says it is too early to tell, party leaders are still spooked by the idea of being associated with other Opposition parties, even non-Islamic ones which share the same platform as Pas.

"You can't divorce a person and then regularly meet him or her in public.

"This is especially so after DAP slammed its door on BA," the DAP insider says.

"Having even an indirect link with Pas now is just as bad, if not worse than the time when DAP and Pas were coalition partners.

"If we go back in any way, we will be treated with suspicion."

The DAP has learnt a lesson the hard way — that they can do without voters' suspicion, which can be unforgiving.

Source:

http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/nst/Saturday/Columns/20060114082546/Article/index_html