

“ Spoiler or not, PKR is here to stay. At the moment, it will not be a problem for Umno or BN. It is for Pas and DAP to sort out their multitude of problems with their junior partner. ”

PKR playing both ends against the middle

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Pas and DAP used to contest in straight fights against BN, but they now have to contend with Parti Keadilan Rakyat, a party with one parliamentary seat and one state seat, trying to call the shots, writes WAN HAMIDI HAMID

THERE was a time when Pas and DAP had no problem working together during elections without having to form any kind of coalition or front.

Their co-operation centred on electoral pacts to ensure a straight fight against any Barisan Nasional candidate.

Almost a decade ago, Parti Keadilan Nasional (or Keadilan), now called Parti Keadilan Rakyat (or PKR), made its appearance in the Malaysian political arena.

Formed to fight for the release of the then jailed former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the party chose to brand itself a multiracial party.

It formed a loose coalition with Pas and DAP to contest the 1999 general election. The first sign of problems began when Keadilan asked for seats traditionally contested by the other two parties.

Despite the Malays' anger towards Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's government for its treatment of Anwar, BN retained its two-thirds majority despite Umno, the backbone of the ruling coalition, losing more seats than usual.

The winner was not Keadilan or DAP but Pas, which, however, not only retained the state of Kelantan but also gained Terengganu and almost won Kedah. Pas won 27 parliamentary seats.

Although DAP won 10 parliamentary seats, gaining three more than in the previous election, its leaders felt they suffered as a consequence of Pas' insistence on its brand of an Islamic state for Malaysia, which pushed Chinese voters towards MCA and Gerakan.

After DAP left the coalition, Pas and Keadilan retained their fragile co-operation. Yet, despite DAP being on its own, the parties continued to work together unofficially on common issues, such as attending human rights and anti-corruption seminars, and having a grassroots-level electoral understanding.

The 2004 general election, a tremendous victory for prime minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, also gave DAP a shot in the arm when it won

12 parliamentary seats to Pas' eight, while Keadilan, which won five parliamentary seats in 1999, was left with only the Permatang Pauh seat with a small majority, despite it being Anwar's stronghold. The seat then and now belongs to Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail.

Since then, the parties have continued an uneasy alliance. Pas may have toned down its Islamic state rhetoric but continues to harp on issues such as apostasy, women's attire and entertainment shows.

DAP, realising the backward trend of greater parochialism in race and religion, concentrates mainly on Chinese constituencies.

PKR, meanwhile, is trying to have its cake and eat it, too.

At its recent congress in Seremban, PKR announced that it would contest 60 parliamentary seats and 120 state seats in the next general election. DAP had expressed interest in contesting 54 parliamentary seats and 115 state seats. (Malaysia has 222 parliamentary seats and 576 state seats.)

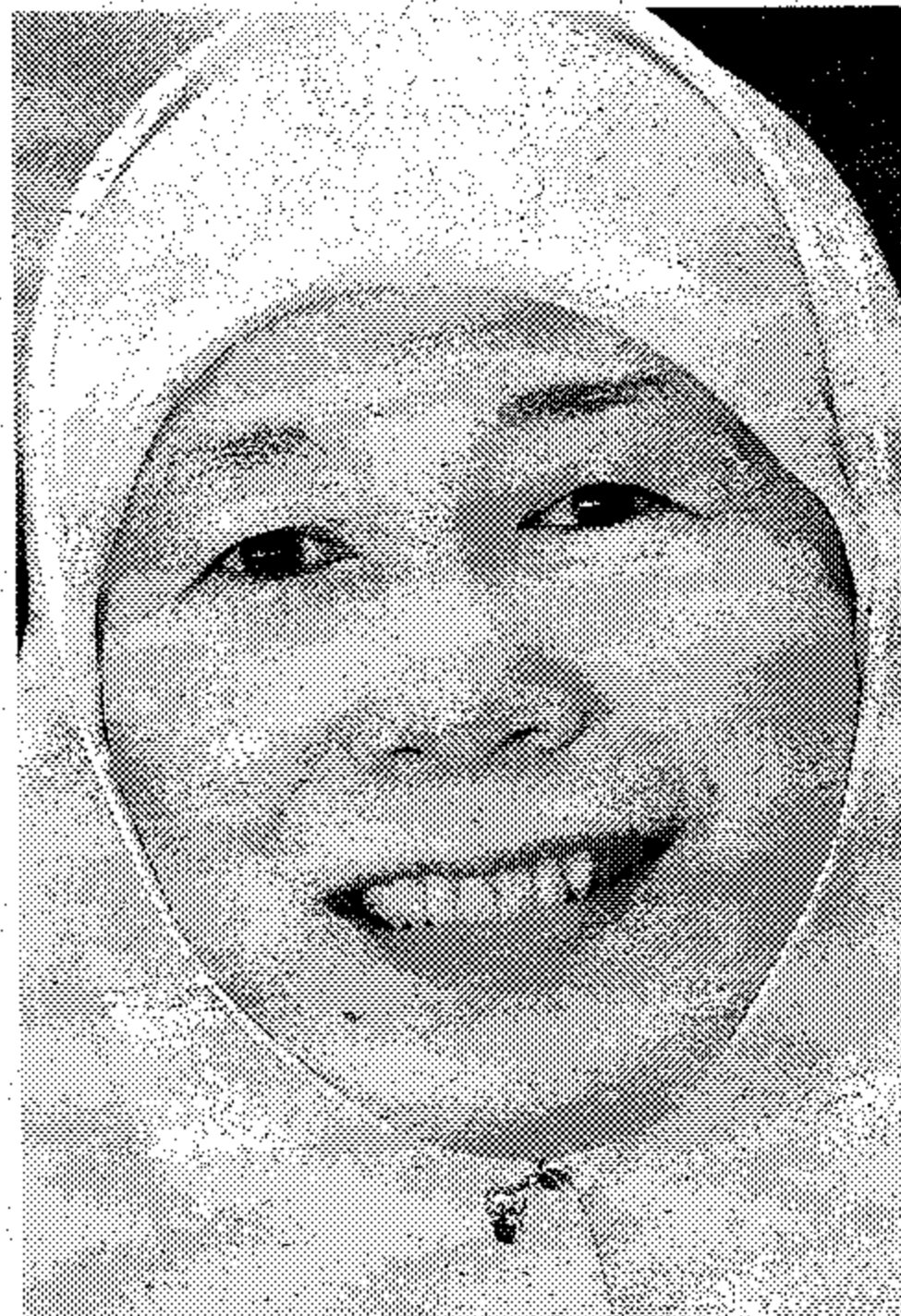
As Pas is only expected to field a couple of candidates in Sabah and Sarawak, it is safe to speculate that the party, despite being the largest and most organised among the opposition, would be turned into the most junior partner with only about 50 parliamentary seats to contest.

From the days when Pas and DAP contested in straight fights against BN, the opposition has reached a situation where PKR, a party with one parliamentary seat and one state seat, is calling the shots.

Or is it? This was only the expressed intention of PKR and DAP, said Pas deputy president Nasharudin Mat Isa. "We've begun our initial negotiation for seat allocations," he said. "In discussions, we will hear views from all sides.

"Any demands made must be supported with evidence such as the party's strength and support. All must be done in the spirit of co-operation and coalition."

Realising its strength, Pas is playing a big brother role. It does not have to announce the



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number of seats to be contested or tell others what to do. It simply plays the role of a host willing to hear the demands of others. Fulfilling those demands is another matter.

Nasharudin is coy when asked about Pas' role among the opposition: "What we're doing is our domestic affair. I don't think we should tell our neighbours about it."

DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng takes a similar stand, despite having had a tough time dealing with PKR in the past.

"I don't want to dwell on the past," Lim says. "I'm taking a positive outlook from a fresh perspective. We only want to ensure a straight fight in all constituencies."

It is also difficult to get opposition leaders to state openly their true feelings towards each other. A few agreed to express views only on condition of anonymity.

While the opposition leaders understand well the reality of having to scramble for seats, they are seasoned enough to be diplomatic. All believe they should stand on a common platform of democracy and anti-corruption, to reduce BN's two-thirds majority. But with PKR being a "spoiler", this will be easier said than done.

PKR Youth vice-chief Amir Sari admitted that the party was a spoiler for the opposition, but it was also a play of words: "We are a spoiler in the sense that we are not taking a racial

or religious line. That's why we don't want seat allocations to be decided on a racial or religious factor," he said.

"In the Sarawak state election last year, we won a Chinese-majority seat. In the Ijok by-election recently, we secured comfortable Chinese support although it was a Malay-majority area."

PKR vice-president Azmin Ali had openly announced the party's intention to contest 60 parliamentary and 120 state seats, claiming the decision was based on the strength of and the support for the party.

He explained that no longer should race and religion be the basis of seat allocation; a warning to opposition partners that new politics in Malaysia must transcend parochialism.

Yet, on the ground, the party portrays a different picture. An opposition insider said that although PKR leaders possessed oratorical and propaganda skills, they lacked administrative expertise.

In many previous elections, PKR candidates had to depend on the well-organised Pas to support them. Even in Ijok, it was DAP leaders who managed to persuade the Chinese voters to accept PKR.

Another opposition insider frankly suggests that some PKR leaders are suffering delusions of grandeur. "I know this is a strong thing to say but for a party with one parliamentary seat, yet wanting the most seats to contest, how else can you describe them?"

While preliminary discussions have begun on seat allocations, the parties are a long way from agreeing on anything. Pas is expected to end up with the most seats to contest, being the real challenger for Umno in all Malay-majority seats. (Umno has 109 parliamentary seats.)

This is also a test for Anwar, who recently declared his intention to lead the opposition in the next general election.

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