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# Eyes on the Prize

After the release from prison of its leader Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's opposition seeks a winning formula at upcoming general elections



With Malaysia's opposition on a high following victory in Anwar Ibrahim's battle against sodomy charges, its attention is shifting to an even tougher campaign - to win power at the next national election.

General elections are due before 2013, and the opposition has a realistic shot at taking power for the first time since Malaysia's founding in 1957. Spurred by a strong showing in the 2008 general poll and emboldened by Anwar's acquittal, the Pakatan Rakyat coalition must now prove that it can muster the stability and maturity to govern effectively.

Anwar's superstar status in Malaysian politics gives the tri-party opposition a flying start, but the election result depend turn on whether voters trust it to deliver on promises of political reform, economic growth and social equity.

Malaysia's overlapping ethnic and religious sensitivities make this a complex challenge. Compounding matters for the opposition is a recent spate of defections and sackings, rebellious local leaders, and internal rifts over thorny religious issues.

The incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN) has enjoyed uninterrupted power under various banners at the federal level since

1957. The ruling coalition is dominated by the Malay-Muslim based United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and has delivered modernisation and prosperity. But many voters have wearied of its heavy-handed conservatism and race-based politics.

Those frustrations burst to the surface at the 2008 general elections when the Pakatan - then an electoral pact between the secular, Chinese based Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) - made unprecedented gains.

Pakatan sealed a coalition agreement after denying BN its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority, and winning control of five state assemblies out of 13. Then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi resigned shortly afterwards.

Pakatan's mission now is to extend those gains despite concerns about its administrative and political cohesion. Party operatives are keen to point to ways the coalition has become more efficient and single-minded since the 2008 polls.

"The coalition has been holding together well since the 2008 elections," said Liew Chin Tong, Member of Parliament for the DAP and its representative to the Pakatan's joint secretariat. "The leadership council has met over 40 times since then."

The coalition's policy platform is unified as well, said Liew, citing the Common Policy Platform of 2009, the "Buku Jingga" (Orange Book), resulting from the 2nd Pakatan Convention in 2010, and finally last year's shadow budget.

"Ultimately, it is our shared agenda that binds us together," he contended.

Power has been the bonding agent

for the ruling 12-party coalition, especially under former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad who held the post for 22 years. For decades opponents were marginalised until the PKR scooped up enough seats in 2008 to become the parliament's largest opposition party.

Since then it has been a mixed bag for the opposition, with the PKR losing several seats to defections and its mantle as the largest opposition party, as well as the state assembly of Perak. It retains coalition leadership by dint of Anwar's charisma and status as the opposition's automatic choice for prime minister.

Latheefa Koya, Director of Legal Affairs and PKR Central Committee member, attributed the defections to a slew of unsuitable candidates fielded in the 2008 ballot to pad out numbers. She played down policy divisions that have resulted in some unseemly headlines in recent months.

"It looks like there is a lot of infighting but actually we are creating a new culture," said Koya. "Of course we can crack the whip, but we prefer that policy go through a process of intense debate."

To be sure, some of the party infighting has been ugly.

On January 8, 2012 Hasan Ali, a prominent PAS member at the Selangor state assembly, was sacked for criticising his party after being reprimanded for anti-Christian outbursts and a divisive bid to ban the sale of alcohol at convenience stores.

Hasan has since formed his own organisation, "a political NGO", now no more than an acronym JATI with the stated aim to defend Islam, Malay rights and the Malay rulers. JATI - which means original; unadulterated in Malay - has been preoccupied with disseminating conspiracy theories of

We have promised to get rid of laws that stifle discussion. People will be able to talk about anything, that's the promise

The acquittal of Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim could accelerate the political comeback of one of Asia's most celebrated reformers ahead of an upcoming election.



Image: Saeed Khan/AFP

illegal mass conversions by Christians of Malay-Muslims, and the DAP's alleged plan to merge Malaysia with Singapore to form a secular republic.

In the largely rural state of Kedah, Pakatan chief minister Azizan Abdul Razak is embroiled in a dispute with an increasingly vocal student movement that accuses him of failing to scrap laws against political activism on campuses. Student leader Adam Adli has threatened to "bring down Pakatan" if they had to.

Azizan has refused to toe the party line on the issue, and in the process publicly questioned the coalition's common policy charter, the Buku Jingga.

On the big picture issues however,

Pakatan seems to have reached a broad consensus. Lawmaker Liew Chin Tong said the coalition is united in its goal of eradicating crony capitalism, which many Malaysians blame on the official system of preferential treatment for ethnic Malays.

### Ethnic composition of Malaysia

Malays	67.4%
Chinese	24.6%
Indians	7.3%
Others	0.7%

Source: Population and Housing Census 2010. Malaysia

Anwar has publicly committed Pakatan to reform the 41-year old affirmative action system that discriminates against ethnic Chinese and Indians in job placements, university admissions, and government contracts.

Party strategists expect that opening up Malaysian society in this and other ways will ultimately provoke unfettered discussion of trickier issues like Muslim apostasy and sexual freedoms.

"We have promised to get rid of laws that stifle discussion," said Pakatan's Latheefa Koya. "People will be able to talk about anything, that's the promise." o sk