

Is Pakatan afraid of its own shadow?

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ABOUT-TURN: The opposition's failure to form a shadow cabinet shows the three Pakatan parties don't see eye to eye on many issues

BY definition, a shadow cabinet represents a group of senior opposition figures in the Westminster system of government which forms an alternative cabinet to the government, and whose members "shadow" each minister to provide a system of checks and balances.

According to Prof Rodney Brazier, a United Kingdom constitutional law expert, the convention of having a shadow cabinet in Britain is not new. Throughout the 19th century, they were simply known as former cabinet ministers. The word "former" was replaced by "shadow" in 1880, hence the shadow cabinet.

Shadow cabinets are the norm in mature parliamentary democracies, such as Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Turkey and many other countries.

In the case of Malaysia, the opposition appears to go against its word or contradicts itself every time the issue of shadow cabinet is raised and debated, raising doubts about its credibility.

Opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who went on record for a few times since the March 2008 general election promising a shadow cabinet, now has said there will not be a shadow cabinet.

His latest contention that Pakatan Rakyat does not need a shadow cabinet because it is not a common practice in other countries, such as Indonesia or Thailand, simply does not hold water.

Why a change of heart after all this while?

The issue was reignited when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak last week challenged the opposition to form its much-promised shadow cabinet. The Barisan Nasional chairman said the most fundamental thing any opposition should do was to have a shadow cabinet, but Pakatan could not even do this.

"You must show your team. You must show your cabinet. Don't talk about forming the government, form a shadow cabinet first," he said at the Gerakan annual delegates' conference.

Anwar has now gone against his word. "A shadow cabinet is only practised in the United Kingdom and Australia. Not in the United States, France, Indonesia or Thailand," he responded later.

His excuse in the past was that Pakatan's parliamentary panels had been undertaking some of the functions as a shadow cabinet. But these committees, which are made up of representatives from each party, are not a good substitute for a shadow cabinet.

Perhaps the real reason why Anwar (we are assuming he is the shadow prime minister) refused to unveil his shadow cabinet is because the three Pakatan parties, with widely differing agendas and ideologies, do not see eye to eye on many issues.

There is no real unity in the opposition and there is lack of consensus on issues such as hudud, let alone power-sharing.

If they cannot be transparent on things that matter most to the rakyat, then how can the people have confidence in their leadership?

The cracks between Pas and DAP over the hudud issue certainly reflect the vulnerability of the opposition pact and no amount of smokescreens can camouflage that.

Even with a shadow cabinet, the three parties -- including Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat -- are bound to face a fractious tussle for ministerial positions if they ever win power at the federal level.

We see that happening in Selangor now. A mere mention by PKR vice-president Azmin Ali of the possibility of Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim being promoted to a federal position from being Selangor menteri besar has sparked an uproar within Pakatan.

Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng has brushed aside an initial list of shadow cabinet ministers purportedly released by PKR.

He instead suggested that should Pakatan form the next Federal Government, each ministerial portfolio would have three members, one each from each party.

"PR is more concerned about policies that benefit the people and not personality or position," he was quoted as saying. "We are not crazy for position."

Does this mean the potential Pakatan cabinet, already littered with political dynasties, will be so unwieldy and cumbersome just to accommodate each party? It must be setting a new world record for cabinet size.

Pakatan leaders know that to cobble together a realistic list of shadow cabinet members now is politically risky as it could start fresh bickering among them and undermine their electoral chances.

So it is better to agree to disagree and sweep the problem under the carpet, at least for now.

Returning to the issue of political dynasties, the Anwar, Karpal and Lim families are set to rule the cabinet if Pakatan ever comes to power. Voters will have to decide then between real democracy and Pakatan's brand of political dynasty.

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