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Elizabeth Wong, Karpal Singh and Hudud: Can Pakatan Survive Differences?

Goh Nur Firdaus Firoz

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Since its success at the 8 March 2008 general election, Malaysia's opposition Pakatan Rakyat has seen challenges that often test the coalition's fundamental differences. Can Pakatan stay glued and gain strength from these trials or will it give way to ideological differences?

MALAYSIA'S OPPOSITION coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, is facing more testing times with the recent Elizabeth Wong saga. As if the tussle over *hudud* law and Perak has not hurt the party's intra-coalition relations enough, this latest incident, if not managed well, will expose the coalition's fundamental differences that have threatened, time and again, to split the opposition.

Thus far, Pakatan (or PR for short) has won voters over based on its promise of change in Malaysian politics. It hopes to build a new Malaysia, different from the nation-state of the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) which is premised on *ketuanan Melayu* or Malay supremacy. Pakatan's eclectic mix of an Islamist party, the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), a secular Chinese-based Democratic Alliance Party (DAP), and strongman Anwar Ibrahim's multiracial Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), has been both its strength and its weakness. The opposition alliance has lasted due to each component party's appeal to different sections of Malaysian society. It has grown from strength to strength with each passing contest at the ballot-box. Pakatan is now touted to win the coming by-elections in April following its strong showing at the 8 March 2008 general election, followed by the by-election victories at Permatang Pauh (Penang) and Kuala Terengganu (Terengganu) recently.

Pakatan has however long been under pressure to keep its disparate components together. Although united by the same goal to ensure citizen equality and freedom, in a country rife and alive with racial politics, each component party moves with different heads based on their respective electoral appeal. But the very different party ideologies have surfaced ever so often, threatening to split the coalition.

As ideological cracks become more obvious with each subsequent strife, will Pakatan's coalition members be able to withstand such fundamental differences to see them through the long term, or will they remain at best by-election buddies whose friendship is going downhill? Three issues are currently testing their cohesion:

PAS, DAP and *hudud*

PAS' agenda of implementing hudud law has been a big thorn in the flesh of Pakatan, particularly the DAP. The Chinese-based party has often crossed swords with PAS over the Islamist party's insistence on creating an Islamic state. While PAS has often danced around the ambiguity of what it means by *hudud* or Islamic criminal law, nevertheless, constant calls for it has threatened to drive away Pakatan's non-Muslim supporters. Despite PAS' new strategy of downplaying the notion of an Islamic state and *hudud*, such tension sometimes arise unexpectedly. One example is PAS vice-president Husam Musa's recent statement made during a debate that PAS would implement *hudud* laws should it come to power. His statement came just days before the Kuala Terengganu by-election last December. Support for this statement by party president Hadi Awang and spiritual leader Nik Aziz has disturbed the non-Muslim members of the coalition who had stood by Pakatan's new emphasis on equality and freedom for all. PAS and the DAP however managed to close ranks ahead of the Kuala Terengganu by-election. PAS' subsequent electoral success in that by-election has kept Pakatan together despite their ideological differences.

Perak Frogs, Karpal Singh and Anwar Ibrahim

The ongoing Perak debacle has become another important testing ground for Pakatan. The rift between DAP chairman Karpal Singh and Pakatan de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim threatened to tear apart the coalition. Karpal's outspoken call for Anwar's resignation to take responsibility for the fall of Perak to BN through defections once again exposed the inherent weakness in the opposition despite the pulling power of Anwar. While party-hopping had been the hope for change in Anwar's initial plans to capture federal power in September 2008, this tactic has now been used by BN to deadly effect against Pakatan. Thus far, other DAP strongmen Lim Kit Siang and secretary-general Lim Guan Eng have shown continued support for Anwar, leaving Karpal isolated and showing that the DAP leadership remains committed to Anwar's leadership of Pakatan. For the sake of political expediency, these differences seem to have been again set aside so as not to jeopardise opposition unity ahead of the three by-elections scheduled in April.

Elizabeth Wong

Nude pictures of Pakatan assemblywoman, Elizabeth Wong, surfacing recently do not bode well for the coalition. Whether or not Wong is a victim of unlawful dissemination remains secondary. Different parts of Malaysian society have stamped their brand of morality on the issue. The more conservative Muslims dictate that the exploration of female sexuality is immoral and should be punished by law; the more liberal quarters sympathise with Wong, seeing her as a victim whose privacy has been cruelly trespassed.

Representatives of Malaysian society and coalition parties are not spared from the strain of moral judgement. PAS has been compelled to comment, while DAP maintains its support for Wong and the ideals of equality and individual freedom. Again, under such duress do the differences between coalition members become painfully obvious. While PAS cannot be seen as supporting promiscuity and pre-marital sex, it also cannot impose Islamic law and morality on a non-Muslim. This is a rather tricky situation for the coalition members to be in; to acquiesce to one side may mean the loss of another section of its supporters. Although Wong has tendered her resignation, how the issue is dealt with and how PAS positions itself on this question would be scrutinised..

These three instances highlight the fundamental differences among member parties, straining the already fragile inter-party relations within Pakatan. It must be remembered that the coalition has failed before, with DAP throwing in the towel in 2001 after it suffered a massive loss of support among its Chinese majority electorate following its alliance with PAS in the formation of Barisan Alternatif, Pakatan's predecessor.

BN, and more importantly, UMNO, stands to gain from Pakatan's weaknesses. How the opposition coalition survives depends on its ability to weather through storms and avoid being manipulated by party rivals. To do this, Pakatan needs to be wary of who it allows to join its ranks, and how it conducts itself in times of discord. Unity is key in trying times, and internal factions and rebel individuals should be handled and resolved swiftly.

The Pakatan alliance is only as good as it gets; any fallout will render the opposition maimed and thrown further away from its target of taking over parliament. While the Anwar factor holds the coalition together, Pakatan can only be as great as the sum of all its parts. Without a proper system of managing inter-party relations, whether it will withstand internal discord remains questionable; for now, however, it appears to be surviving.. If Pakatan continues to display its staying power in the face of the growing attacks on it, there is a future for the opposition.

Goh Nur Firdaus Firoz is a Research Analyst at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.