

## **Handling adversity, diversity and identity**

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*The Straits Times*, 17 March 2009

Malaysia's opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR), is facing testing times. As if the tussle over Islamic criminal law has not hurt the party's intra-coalition relations enough, the saga revolving around nude pictures of politician Elizabeth Wong has further exposed its fundamental differences.

Thus far, Pakatan has won votes based on its promise of change in Malaysian politics. It hopes to build a Malaysia different from that envisaged by Umno-led ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, which is premised on 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 Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's multi-racial Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), has been both its strength and its weakness.

The opposition alliance has lasted due to each of its component's appeal to different sections of Malaysian society. It has grown from strength to strength with each contest at the ballot-box since its strong showing in the general election of March 2008. It is touted to win by-elections next month.

Pakatan, however, has found it difficult to keep its disparate components together. Although the parties are united by the same goal of equality, in a country rife with racial politics, their very different ideologies keep surfacing. Will Pakatan's component parties be able to overcome their differences, or will they remain at best by-election buddies?

Three issues are currently testing their cohesion: Islamic criminal law, the loss of Perak and the Elizabeth Wong scandal.

The PAS' aim of implementing hudud, or Islamic criminal law, has been a thorn in the flesh of Pakatan, particularly for the DAP. While the PAS often dances around what it means by hudud, its calls for its implementation threatens to drive away Pakatan's non-Muslim supporters.

Despite the PAS' new strategy of downplaying the notion of an Islamic state and hudud, the issue can pop up unexpectedly. A few months ago, for example, PAS vice-president Husam Musa said that the PAS would implement hudud laws should it come to power. His statement, which came just days before a by-election last December, disturbed non-Muslim members of the coalition.

The ongoing Perak debacle has become another important test for Pakatan. The rift between DAP chairman Karpal Singh and de facto Pakatan leader Anwar threatens to tear the coalition apart. Mr Singh called for Mr Anwar to resign after Perak fell to BN through defections.

Other DAP leaders - including Mr Lim Kit Siang and Mr Lim Guan Eng - have continued to support Mr Anwar in public, leaving Mr Singh isolated. Differences seem to have been set aside in the name of expediency - in this case, the need to preserve opposition unity ahead of the three by-elections scheduled for next month. But how long will the peace last?

Another matter that has roiled the coalition is the controversy over the nude photos of

Pakatan assemblywoman Wong. Whether or not she was the victim of an unlawful leak seems secondary to many. Different sections of Malaysia's society have stamped their own brand of morality on the issue. Conservative Muslims tend to be unsympathetic towards her; the more liberal sympathise with her. The PAS has been compelled to comment on the matter, while the DAP has maintained its support for Ms Wong.

This is a tricky situation for the coalition. Accepting the stand of one partner may mean losing groups that support the others. The Malays will scrutinise PAS' position on this matter; while the Chinese will scrutinise DAP and PKR's.

It must be remembered that opposition coalitions have failed before in Malaysia. In 2001, for instance, the DAP withdrew from the Barisan Alternatif after it lost support among the Chinese for its alliance with PAS.

Pakatan's longevity will depend on its ability to weather storms and avoid being manipulated by its rivals. It needs to be careful who it admits into its ranks. Rebel factions and individuals should be dealt with swiftly.

Mr Anwar is holding the coalition together for now. But it is questionable whether it will survive for long if there is no proper system to manage intra-coalition relations.

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