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The “Third Force” in Malaysia: Finding Relevance in an Emerging Duopoly

By Aff Pasuni

Synopsis

The “third force” in Malaysian politics continues to progress with Tengku Razaleigh’s new NGO Amanah. With the general election looming, the “third force” will face an uphill task to make gains if it does not ally with one or more established political entities in Malaysia.

Commentary

EARLY THIS year, the former UMNO and PKR politician Zaid Ibrahim founded a new party, the Parti Kesejahteraan Insan Tanah Air (KITA). It was formed supposedly to act as a “third force” between the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) and opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalitions, to provide checks and balances between the two dominant political entities in the country.

Recently, the veteran UMNO politician, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah founded Angkatan Amanah Merdeka (Amanah), which is also touted as a “third force”. Formed as an NGO, the goal of Amanah is “to represent the middle and moderate voice” of Malaysia. However the group has not ruled out being political, opening the way for a more political role in the run up to the looming 13th general election. These two entities raise the question of the relevance of the third force in the emerging duopoly of Malaysian politics.

Formation of the “third force”

The idea of a “third force” is not new, having being proposed by lawyer-activist Haris Ibrahim and influential blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin. In fact, some have argued that such a “force” has always been a feature of Malaysian politics, be it in the form of NGOs, civil and religious movements, and even individuals who seek political reforms.

The “third force” term was coined against the backdrop of the political opposition’s success against the incumbents in the 2008 elections, giving rise to hope for a two-party system in Malaysia. The division between the two groupings was sharpened by the subsequent politicking between them. To understand the “third force” rationale, one has to look at events after the 2008 elections, where no party has been spared from criticisms amidst the country’s tumultuous political scene. For example, both the ruling and opposition parties were criticised for their role in the recent Bersih rally; while one was blamed for unleashing police brutality, the other was accused of playing agent provocateur.

The country has also witnessed the controversial long-drawn court case involving the opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, and the constant PAS-DAP disagreements over religious issues. In addition, there were also criticisms

against aspects of the government's Economic Transformation Programme, and the seemingly free rein given to Utusan Malaysia, UMNO's Malay language newspaper, and the NGO PERKASA in raising racial issues.

Therefore some have seen the need for a "third force" to balance the political polemics as well as filling the void in the so-called middle ground.

Relevance to be seen

To assess the potential relevance of the "third force" in Malaysian politics, the following features of the recent political developments in the country need to be addressed:

Firstly, for the "third force" to play a part in deciding on Malaysia's direction, a main challenge is getting enough members to support them. In order to initiate political change, the party needs to have very strong grassroots support, which they are trying to garner by attracting prominent names into their fold. However the effectiveness of such a move is in question, as very few Malaysian politicians are able to sway the masses solely with their personality, and who can dissociate themselves from party associations.

Secondly, the inter-dependence of civil society groups and NGOs with the political coalitions in Malaysia should be scrutinised more closely. The recent Bersih rally, though touted as apolitical and representative of the civil society, was nonetheless very closely associated with the opposition PR coalition. On the other side the Malay rights NGO PERKASA is led by the UMNO-friendly Ibrahim Ali and enjoys the patronage of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed. While the political coalitions are continuing to become the major galvanising forces in politics, the civil society groups and NGOs are seen to be affiliated, closely or tenuously, to either one of these two political groupings.

Furthermore, given that the alternative media are also regarded as strongly partisan in some of their coverage and commentaries, it is doubtful that any new entity which strives to be relevant in the political discourse is able to remain neutral always.

Thirdly, the Malaysian electoral landscape is too big for any one political group. While this may benefit new parties, to achieve political dominance they pragmatically require alliances. For example, Malaysia's oldest opposition party PAS recently held its 57th AGM. But it was only recently that they managed to be a part of a more effective force in parliament as a component of the PR coalition after the 2008 elections.

Sarawak's state elections in April this year also serve to illustrate the dominance of BN and to a lesser extent the PR. The PR arguably made significant inroads, while BN's number of seats dipped slightly. However the biggest losers of the election were the independents and new parties such as Parti Cinta Malaysia, which lost its only seat in the state assembly.

Between principle and political survival

All these lead to one point which is, if the "third force" is to become relevant in Malaysian politics in the near future – specifically the 13th general election – it is imperative that its component groups ally themselves with more established political entities. Although to succumb to that is antithetical to their founding motive, it will be difficult to be purposeful in Malaysia's political development without losing political independence.

Whether the "third force" remains truly independent or otherwise, it will have to choose between principle and political survival. While its inception is based on the former, it is likely the latter will dictate their strategy in the virulent political landscape of Malaysia.

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