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Malaysia's Opposition Coalition: Getting their act together

By Afif Pasuni

Synopsis

With the Malaysian general election due very soon, can the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (Pakatan) hold its ground as the only credible competitor to the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN)? Pakatan's strength ultimately depends on its component parties' ability to deliver in spite of their ideological differences.

Commentary

THE OPPOSITION Pakatan Rakyat coalition formed only three years ago, faces a monumental task against the more established ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) which has been in power since Malaysia's independence. Pakatan, comprising the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS, Democratic Action Party, DAP and the People's Justice Party, PKR, will be facing its first general election as a coalition, an exercise that could possibly make or break it as an alternative to the BN.

Pakatan's component parties have had a fairly long history of cooperation: they worked together in the 1999 general election when the three opposition parties formed the Barisan Alternatif (BA) or Alternative Front. The cooperation was however short-lived with the departure of DAP in 2001, largely over ideological differences with PAS' Islamist agenda.

What's different now?

Pakatan however seem to have found common ground with the pivotal leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, who was in jail during the BA years. With him as a de-facto leader, Pakatan has been able to organise themselves around some common objectives and agree on the deployment of their party machineries for the elections, expected by April 2013.

They have subsumed the diverse orientation of their respective party members to draw up a common strategy set out in the Buku Jingga (Orange Book) at the end of 2010, which essentially combined their collective political goals. Although its content may seem somewhat generic, it nevertheless underlined their ability to put their differences aside and focus on a common vision and political objectives to wrest control of Putrajaya.

Nevertheless Pakatan has underlying problems. Firstly, the ideological differences between the DAP and PAS are deep rooted and surface every now and then, which make the coalition appear shaky. They would need to be thrashed out in the long run though for now Pakatan are downplaying their conflicting agendas for the sake

of political expediency.

Waning strength?

Secondly, Pakatan's popularity, which was strongest immediately after the 12th general election in 2008 when Pakatan secured successive victories in several by-elections, found its positive momentum waning subsequently. Pakatan's penchant for supporting public demonstrations such as the Bersih rallies and Himpunan Hijau (Green Assembly), was seen as aimed at generating support and momentum in their favour. Furthermore negative responses to such events from the authorities would likely be amplified through the social media, giving more advantage to Pakatan.

Thirdly, some quarters who claim that Pakatan will bring change to the ethnic-based politics will be sorely disappointed by the make-up of Pakatan as a coalition, which comprises parties generally segregated along ethnic lines. While the inclusion of Malays and Indians in DAP's leadership after the recent party elections is noteworthy, they were co-opted and not elected to their positions.

With the general election just around the corner, the main players have placed their cards on the table. PM Najib Razak has dangled carrots in the form of budget handouts, in addition to his continuous economic and policy reforms. For Pakatan, their commitment to political change remains central to their theme. The Anwar factor plays a crucial role in the immediate future to ensure the continued validity of Pakatan.

No other alternative

Pakatan's unity is vital in their quest to breach BN's dominance in parliament, and this will dictate how Pakatan acts as a group in the immediate future. Still it has proved difficult for Pakatan to preserve a unified façade, as seen in the responses to Pakatan's vice-president Nurul Izzah Anwar's recent statement on freedom of religion and PAS' moral policing issues. The coalition needs to work harder to maintain the appearance of solidarity.

At the moment, Pakatan does not seem to have a considerable edge over BN. But for Malaysians who are dissatisfied with the government, the current political landscape does not offer many other alternatives. As a relatively new and untested coalition, Pakatan's strength ultimately lies in the performance of its individual component parties and their abilities to secure votes. Herein lie their weaknesses: Firstly, the stronger a component party is, the more adamant is its demands on the rest in the coalition, and this might fray the cooperation in Pakatan.

Secondly, heavy reliance on individual component parties and their traditional bases may also alienate the fence-sitters. Consequently if Pakatan is to expand beyond the traditional enclaves of Penang and Kelantan and consolidate their hold on Selangor, they will need to set aside their differences and strengthen their unified approach in time for the 13th general election.

Afif Pasuni is Associate Research Fellow in the Malaysia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.