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Malaysia's 13th General Election: Prospects and Challenges for DAP

By Farish A Noor

Synopsis

The Democratic Action Party (DAP) which is one-third of the Pakatan Rakyat opposition alliance today, draws its support primarily from non-Malay, non-Muslim voters. How will the DAP fare at the coming general election if it has to make compromises with its coalition partners, including the Islamic party PAS that still upholds its vision of eventually creating an Islamic state in Malaysia?

Commentary

AS THE 13th Malaysian general election draws closer, there has been speculation among analysts as to whether the country will witness the emergence of a two-coalition system of politics. Since 1957 Malaysia has been governed by parties that were in coalition together, first as the Alliance (1957-1974) and then as the Barisan Nasional or National Front (1974-2013). The opposition parties, however, have been scattered and unable to form a cohesive counter-bloc thus far.

Among the prominent opposition parties today is the Democratic Action Party (DAP) that came into being in the mid-1960s. The DAP purports to be a left-of-centre democratic party that is secular, but from the 1960s has been identified mainly with the Malaysian-Chinese voters. Its fortunes have depended upon its ability to speak for the non-Malay communities and also on the strengths and weaknesses of its main rival, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). In terms of its electoral performance to date, the DAP's fortunes have been mixed.

DAP's political fortunes

In the 1969 elections the DAP announced its presence by winning 13 Parliamentary seats, the same number as its rival, MCA. From the outset it was clear that the DAP posed the biggest threat not to UMNO, but the MCA for the Malaysian-Chinese vote base. In 1974 DAP won nine seats (while MCA regained 19) and improved its position in 1978 when it won 16 seats. DAP's fortunes dipped again in 1982 when it won nine seats but peaked in 1986 when it gained 24 seats in Parliament. In 1990 DAP won 20 seats, but in 1995 declined to nine. Since 1999 the DAP's share of seats in Parliament has been steadily increasing: from 10 in 1999, 12 in 2004, to 28 in 2008. DAP's gains since 1999 to 2008 have partly been at the expense of the MCA, whose number of Parliamentary seats has declined.

Several observations can be made about the DAP's electoral chances at the next GE based on its electoral performance so far:

Firstly, it can be seen that since the elections of 1969 to the early 2000s, the DAP has set its sights on the MCA in its long-term strategy of winning the support of Malaysian Chinese voters. Notwithstanding its claim to be a left-leaning secular party, the DAP has taken up several causes that can be described as communal in nature, including the championing of vernacular schools for non-Malays and demanding more political representation for non-Bumiputeras on the political stage.

During the 1980s and 1990s the DAP was one of the strongest critics of the Islamisation policy in the country, which necessarily meant that it could not see eye-to-eye with the other large opposition party in the country, PAS. At the height of PAS' campaign to create an Islamic state in Malaysia, the DAP consistently opposed it and as a result was able to reap benefits at the 1986 elections – where PAS won only one Parliamentary seat while DAP won 24.

No alternative but to join a coalition

Secondly, due in part to the nature of Malaysia's race-based politics, the DAP has come to realise that its main vote base lies with the non-Malay voters. But this also means that the DAP can never come to power at the Federal government level unless it is part of a bigger political coalition that can win the support of the wider Malaysian electorate. This was not possible from the mid-1960s to the early 2000s because the DAP could not find a way to co-operate with PAS, whose goal of creating an Islamic state was anathema to them.

It is only since 2004 that the DAP began to build bridges with the other parties, notably PAS and the Anwar Ibrahim-led People's Justice Party (PKR), first during their short-lived 'Barisan Alternatif' alliance and now in the Pakatan Rakyat coalition. Despite the claims of the leaders of the opposition parties however, there are deep-rooted issues between the parties that remain unresolved.

The contentious nature of this ideological divide was highlighted by the recent controversy over the Christmas speech by DAP leader and Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng, in which he defended the use of the word 'Allah' in Malay-language bibles as in East Malaysia. The DAP leader was accused by his opponents of provoking Muslim sensitivities in the country but was initially defended by his coalition partners in PAS. Subsequently, however, PAS withdrew its support after its Shura Council, which determines PAS' ideological and theological goals, declared that the use of the word 'Allah' in Malay-language bibles may lead to confusion among the people.

This issue, played up in the media, has shown how delicate the Pakatan Rakyat coalition can be at times. DAP leaders have also consistently stated that they will never support the creation of an Islamic state in the country, which is bound to ruffle the feathers of the conservatives in PAS.

Can DAP reinvent its image?

Thirdly, it remains to be seen if the DAP can reinvent itself from being seen as a Malaysian-Chinese party to becoming a more pluralistic and inclusive party that appeals to all the ethnic groups in the country. In fact, the last DAP General Assembly saw virtually all Malay leaders failing to be elected to the party leadership – forcing the party Secretary-General to nominate two of them into the Central Executive Committee. With the exception of DAP chairman Karpal Singh, most of the party's leaders today are Malaysian Chinese, entrenching perceptions that it is fundamentally a Chinese party. The DAP is expected to field its candidates against those from MCA at the coming elections.

Though the outcome of the coming general election remains uncertain, it is clear that the DAP intends to remain in the Pakatan Rakyat coalition as the Pakatan is the only vehicle that can possibly bring it to power at the Federal government level. This does, however, mean that should Pakatan come to power, the DAP will have to balance the demands of its own supporters with the wider aspirations of the whole coalition.

This may entail having to placate some of the demands of the Islamists of PAS, but such a move will also provoke a reaction among the DAP's traditional vote-base made up of predominantly non-Malays and non-Muslims.

Farish A Noor is Associate Professor with the Contemporary Islam Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.