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Malaysia's DAP in a Unique Position of Strength

By Shahril Hamdan

SYNOPSIS

The cohesion of Malaysia's coalition government owes as much to the new posture of the DAP as it does to PKR and UMNO. But interpreting developments chiefly from the prism of the government's stability risks missing other important dynamics about DAP and its place in Malaysia's political system. A case can be made that the DAP stands to be the biggest winner in this political reconfiguration.

COMMENTARY

Recently, six months after the 15th General Election, parties in Malaysia's Unity Government held a joint convention at the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. It aimed to solidify relations between the 19 parties that make up the coalition while also highlighting the imperative of cohesion and unity to internal and external audiences.

Principally through many speeches from party leaders throughout the day, such signals were indeed conveyed, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Speakers from UMNO and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) were keen to exchange compliments, straining credulity given how both were until recently arch enemies. The Sabah and Sarawak parties were more circumspect in tone and substance – and this heterodoxy ought not go unnoticed – but they did not challenge the overarching mood.

Amidst the backslappings, there was one highly anticipated speech by the Secretary-General of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Anthony Loke Siew Fook. His speech was arguably more important than those of UMNO President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi or even Prime Minister and PKR President Anwar Ibrahim. After all, there is little mystery about the latter two individuals' direction of travel with regard to the new political union – at least for the moment. But Loke has been relatively and conspicuously muted on the subject, focusing instead on his work as Transport Minister.

DAP Leading from Experience

If Loke's aim was to put forward the case that DAP poses no threat to Malay-Muslim privileges and their cherished institutional-political norms, and thereby calm all attendant anxieties, he struck the right notes. For example, discerning observers would have allowed themselves a wry smile when he laid out the numbers: out of the 148 MPs that make up the government's parliamentary majority, 77 are Bumiputra-Muslims and only 43 are ethnic Chinese. Others could have said it. But the fact that it was DAP that did was most significant.

Such remarks, in fact, speak to the ethos of the DAP's new leadership: exercise restraint, give no cause for nativist alarmism and compensate generously for the trust deficit it has always suffered among Malay-Muslim voters. Evidently, DAP is anxious to learn the lessons from its first truncated stint in power after the 2018 elections, when a more abrasive Lim Guan Eng led the party.

Back then, DAP bore the brunt of the "culture wars". There was the racialised polemic around Malaysia's ultimately aborted accession as a party to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. There were the arguments about official government press statements made in Mandarin, and the clamour for local council elections seen to favour non-Malay candidates in townships due to population demographics.

In all cases, DAP was an easy target for UMNO and PAS in opposition, as well as those who would readily interpret such developments through a racial lens and hence as a challenge to the social contract not to be tolerated. The fall of the Mahathir administration in March 2020 is of course multi-factorial. Even so, a view among many Malays was that DAP had tried to move things too much and too fast.

A Posture for the Current Times

That was then. Today, the Prime Minister is Anwar Ibrahim – a long-time partner DAP has fought alongside for years. And UMNO, the erstwhile resident storyteller of DAP's alleged excesses, is now also a partner in government.

But the culture war is still with us, even if the principal agitators have changed somewhat. DAP is still the choice bogeyman and will be for some time. Egalitarianism is still a loaded concept to be handled with care in Malaysia's racialised political economy.

The biggest difference is that DAP's leadership now appears to have decided that, rather than try to radically transform the terrain, it should aim to succeed in it. In doing so, it cannot rely on allies – old or new – more than it can on its own posturing and actions. Thus, the deliberate restraint and downplaying of its own influence, as encapsulated in Loke's remarks.

In government, DAP no longer counts local council elections as a priority policy. It has not done or said anything particularly bold about Chinese vernacular education – a longstanding port of call in Chinese identity politics. Its National Publicity Secretary

has openly urged members to [vote for UMNO](#) candidates standing in the upcoming state elections, even if as a response to an UMNO leader doing the same for DAP.

But despite holding 40 seats, DAP has only four representatives in the Cabinet. In short, it goes about its business aiming to project competence while ruffling no feathers – so much so that some voices in UMNO may tentatively claim that DAP is being tamed by the former's presence in government.

Questions have been posed: Is DAP now giving in too much? Has it come so far only to play it too safe?

Playing for the Future from a Position of Strength

Such a line of inquiry may betray a misreading of the landscape and an underappreciation of the party's inherent advantages. In the first instance, there is a temptation to read DAP's posturing principally as a contribution to, or a sacrifice even, for the fledgling "unity" government. After all, few questions about the coalition are more live than whether UMNO's Malay base – or what is left of it – can accept this union with an old nemesis.

But if the lens is flipped, and the picture seen from the DAP's unique position instead, its part in this reconfiguration of Malaysia's party politics may have as much to do with its own prospects tomorrow as it does with keeping this government afloat today.

DAP is arguably the most secure, stable and resilient of political parties in Malaysia. It has consolidated its grip on Penang, the second most prosperous state. It boasts the highest win ratio in elections and its MPs hold the largest majorities in the country. The party enjoys near absolute popularity with non-Malays and a broad appeal among middle-class urban voters. It can point to a number of well-regarded policy minds in government and the backbenches. Perhaps more importantly in politics, it has exhibited an ability to gently jettison unpopular or divisive elements – be it individuals or policies – for the greater good of the party.

Based on this reading, it is precisely from such a position of strength and stability that the party does what it is doing now – biding its time. It knows there is little danger of its hard-won advantages dissipating anytime soon. Additionally, there simply isn't a credible alternative for voters who had either abandoned the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) *en masse* beginning four general elections ago, or who have never voted anything but DAP and its allies.

But DAP also knows that its current addressable market is getting saturated and must now be broadened meaningfully. Hence, DAP's seemingly deferential restraint in government is really not about deference at all. Rather, it might be better understood as self-assuredness as it moves towards a greater goal – to more credibly demonstrate its claim to be a multiracial party in substance and not just in name.

Loke himself has addressed the topic many times including even before the 15th General Election, saying that DAP needs to reassure the Malays. Other senior leaders like Liew Chin Tong have been more explicit – calling those who want DAP to focus only on its Chinese base as "half-witted". To be sure, realising this ambition would

require more than just tactical posturing. Difficult decisions will have to be made, such as how to distinguish its vision of a multicultural Malaysia from that of PKR's, for example. But the recent political reconfiguration presents a once in a generation opportunity for DAP to take huge strides.

And why wouldn't they? With downside risks of this approach minimal in the short term, why not sow the seeds for something more ambitious in a long game? If it doesn't work, they will likely be none the weaker. But if they dare dream it and succeed, the DAP might "graduate" from being an indispensable partner in a governing national coalition to being the leader itself. No other party can claim to face as advantageous a calculus. Now *that* would be the more audacious proposition.

Shahril Hamdan is a Visiting Fellow with the Malaysia Programme at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He was the Information Chief of UMNO and Deputy Youth Chief of UMNO before his suspension from the party in January 2023. He now co-hosts a current affairs podcast "Keluar Sekejap" ("Out for the Moment") and is active on the lecture circuit speaking on public affairs and policy advocacy. He also runs a corporate advisory firm for international investors wanting to navigate Malaysia's political economy and can be reached at shahril@watchtowerco.org.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg