

PSM (Malaysia): Socialists launch their biggest election campaign yet

Friday 20 April 2018, by [ARUTCHELVAN S.](#), [BOYLE Peter](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2018).

The Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM), respected as a small principled party that packs a big punch, is running its largest election campaign yet. Peter Boyle speaks to its campaign coordinator.

S. Arutchelvan, better known as “Arul”, is the PSM’s election campaign coordinator.

It is 2.34am in Malaysia and S. Arutchelvan (better known as “Arul”) is typing in answers to my questions on the PSM campaign in the country’s general election on May 9.

It’s far from a really late night for the PSM’s election campaign coordinator (he seldom gets to bed before 4am) and the next day, the full list of party candidates is to be announced. Each will make a full declaration of assets.

When “people’s doctor” Jeyakumar Devaraj (“Dr Kumar” as he’s popularly known) won the PSM’s only seat in federal parliament in 2008, he was hailed a “giant killer”. He had defeated a powerful, notoriously corrupt minister in the ruling Barisan Nasional.

Kumar has held onto the seat of Sungai Siput since then and is now standing for a third term.

The PSM has had a long struggle to participate in elections. Arul explained to *Green Left Weekly*: “In 1999, we stood in one parliamentary seat. In 2004, 2008 and 2013 election, we stood in four seats and this election we are standing in 16 seats (four for the federal parliament and 12 for state assemblies).

“Between 1999 and 2008, the party was not allowed registration and we were forced to run under the logo of other opposition parties.

“In the 2013 election, though the PSM had won electoral registration, we were still bullied by the bigger opposition parties out of running under our own logo.

“In spite of our reluctant agreement to use the Justice Party (PKR) logo as requested by [opposition leader] Anwar [Ibrahim] in 2013, we were three cornered in three out of the four seats we stood in by other opposition parties.

“So in this election we decided to stand in more seats and popularise the party in more places where we have done work, have election machinery and a candidate endorsed by the local branch.”

Arul said that the PSM had been mocked as a “four-seat party”. Its members felt if it did not expand its electoral campaigns, the PSM would not be taken seriously as a national party or potential third force.

"There was also a growing demand among young voters for a third alternative," Arul noted. "They were fed up with the governing and major opposition parties all supporting neoliberal capitalist policies."

This frustration built up even more sharply when the major opposition parties, now in a coalition called Pakatan Harapan (PH, Alliance of Hope), fell behind former repressive and corrupt PM Dr Mahathir Mohamed, who was responsible for first jailing opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim on sodomy charges.

Mahathir was responsible for violently repressing the "reformasi" democracy movement in the late 1990s. His government also detained, without trial, many progressive activists, writers and opposition politicians under the notorious Internal Security Act.

He also brought in anti-worker laws and opposed minimum wages legislation.

"Mahathir's politics has not changed but the opposition's has", says Arul citing the significant retreats in the opposition front's program since the last election such as dropping the call for the re-introduction of election for local governments and free university education and returning to race-based instead of needs-based social policies.

"The major opposition parties brought in Dr M in the hope that he would deliver them a 'Malay tsunami' in votes.

"It is an act of desperation. They think Mahathir is the only one who can do it and everyone in the opposition, including Bersih (the Movement for Free and Fair Elections), seems resigned to this fact. The opposition have given it up to Mahathir and many in the civil society movements are quite silent because they have got no alternatives."

Some well-known civil society figures such as Haris Ibrahim, Jayanath Appudurai, Rohana Ariffin, left-wing author Dr Kua Kia Soong and even a retired naval commander, S Thayaparan, have endorsed the PSM's campaign. However, many PH supporters are denouncing the PSM candidates as "spoilers".

Arul vehemently rejects this accusation.

"We are only standing in 3% of seats. We are asking people to vote for us in the 3% because our candidates are mostly activist and our party aspirations are much better than the rest and on the 97% seats we are not contesting, we are asking people to vote PH.

"If PH wins that will be great and the illusion that BN cannot be beaten will be over. If the opposition loses because of mass cheating by the ruling party then we must fight back. PSM is ready to work with PH in such a fight back.

"If, in that scenario, PH is not ready or willing to fight back, then we believe the opposition may crumble and the old guard, including Mahathir, [Democratic Action Party leader] Lim Kit Siang and Anwar may have to go."

Arul agrees with PH activists who warn that apart from the usual electoral gerrymandering and other dirty tricks with election registration, the ruling BN is trying to keep voter numbers down. It has even chosen a mid-week election day, making it hard for working-class voters to return to their home towns to vote, as the electoral laws require.

In this context, PH have even more viciously attacked the new #UndiRosak movement by frustrated

youth, which calls for spoiling or boycotting the vote. PH accuses the movement of being funded by the BN.

Arul said no evidence has been produced to back up this charge. Rather he said PH leaders should reflect on their responsibility for the disillusionment that #UndiRosak reflects.

"Young voters who are frustrated with the politics of both BN and PH have called for this, especially after Mahathir came back into the picture.

"Some of these young people say if there is no PSM, then vote 'undi rosak' (spoiled vote), so we are also being accused of being behind #UndiRosak.

"#UndiRosak is definitely not funded by BN. We know the people behind it, they are just young activists who are fed up with the system.

"The PSM's position is that people should come out and vote. But if they decide not to vote because of the political bad choices, then it is their democratic fundamental right to spoil their ballot."

With limited resources, the PSM has tried to give as many voters a real political choice by offering non-PSM activists a chance to run as candidates under the PSM logo.

"Two prominent activists who were keen to run under the PSM logo could not stand because of repressive laws, while around 20 others applied. Some were prominent opposition party MPs and State Assembly members who had been denied seats by their party in this general election."

"The PSM was very careful," said Arul on the criteria to accept non-PSM candidates. In the end, it accepted only three: Teh Yee Chieu, a popular environmentalist activist and former state assembly member in Penang; Abdul Razak Ismail, a reformasi and labour activist; and activist and local rock star "Zack" Zainurizzaman Moharam, who is respected for his work with poor communities.

"Besides these, our candidates include two farmers endorsed by a coalition of farmers in the state of Perak and another Indigenous candidate endorsed by the Indigenous community. These are PSM members."

All PSM candidates have agreed to four basic conditions: Support the "For the 99%" election manifesto; declare their assets; reject racial and race politics; and open a service centre in their electorate to take up the needs of ordinary people.

Peter Boyle

P.S.

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<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/malaysia-socialists-launch-their-biggest-election-campaign-yet>