

Malaysia: PSM can spearhead 'third progressive force' at Semenyih by-election

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On May 9th 2018, the Malaysian people chose to cast their votes for the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition because their GE14 manifesto had promised to implement wide-ranging reforms that made them appear radically different from the governance experienced under the Barisan Nasional.

As events have unfolded, PH seems to have become more and more like BN 2.0 especially with the latest assimilation of Umno MPs into PPBM. Was this the change we voted for in GE14? PH is now willing to work with the man who, during his 22 years in office, was responsible for privatising practically all of Malaysia's industry and destroying whatever semblance of democracy we had. More seriously, PH has driven PAS into a closer alliance with Umno.

No commitment to GE14 manifesto

What is disappointing is the apparent lack of commitment and urgency regarding the implementation of some of their manifesto promises. We have witnessed flip-flopping over their promise to abolish toxic institutions and laws, such as the Security Offences Special Measures Act (Sosma) and other detention-without-trial laws in the country.

Nor do their promises focus on the most urgent and comprehensive reforms that civil society has long argued are of high priority. On top of all that, we have witnessed a disturbing trend of autocratic decision making and policies symptomatic of the old Dr Mahathir Mohamad 1.0 era.

While the PH manifesto prohibits the PM from also taking on the finance portfolio, Mahathir has in the first 100 days taken over the choicest companies, namely Khazanah, PNB & Petronas under his Prime Minister's Office.

It is the return to the old Mahathirist autocracy. Was the Cabinet consulted on the decision to start Proton 2, privatise Khazanah, Malaysia Incorporated and the revival of the failed F1 circuit? The appointment of Mahathir and Economic Affairs Minister Azmin Ali to the board of Khazanah Nasional Berhad also goes against the PH manifesto promise of keeping politicians out of publicly-funded investments since it leads to poor accountability. Only by insisting that boards be comprised of professionals and on rigorous parliamentary checks and balances for bodies such as Khazanah can we ensure a high level of transparency and accountability.

PH has morphed into BN 2.0

So far, the new PH government has not spelt out their fundamental difference in economic policy from the old BN regime. After the fiasco of Proton 1.0 with its huge cost to Malaysian taxpayers, our public transport system and Malaysian consumers, it is unbelievable that such a failed enterprise could be supported by a PH leadership full of former critics of the first Proton project. Another

national car project will surely fail with further losses to the national coffers and we will have to underwrite the losses.

The new PH government had pledged to wipe out kleptocracy and this promise was key to the victory at GE14. They have disappointed the people of Malaysia and especially Sarawakians who have seen the wealth of their state sucked dry by the rapacious greed of the kleptocrats there. The PH government has not yet acted to make the former Sarawak Chief Minister Taib Mahmud declare all his assets and those of his spouse and family. By letting off his long-time ally in Sarawak, Taib, arguably the richest man in Malaysia, the prime minister makes his campaign against former prime minister Najib Razak look like a personal vendetta.

Using the excuse of the government debt to delay local government elections which have been suspended in our country since 1965 is not acceptable. It is a simple matter of abolishing a provision under the Local Government Act 1976 and reviving the Local Government Election Act in order to introduce local government elections. If our income per capita in 1957 was only US\$800 and we could afford local council elections, don't tell us we can't afford local elections when our income per capita is now US\$10,000.

It is equally absurd to tell Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School graduates that their UEC certificate can only be recognised in five years' time. This is a serious breach of promise in the PH GE14 manifesto since more than 80% of Chinese voters voted for PH because of this promised reform.

Many lawyers have pointed out that the repeal or review of our laws that violate basic human rights can be expeditiously accomplished within the first 100 days of the new PH government. These include abolishing laws that allow detention without trial, namely, the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (Sosma), Prevention of Crime Act 1959 (Poca), and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Pota) 2015. This is totally unethical backtracking on the PH GE14 manifesto.

Time to build a third progressive force for the 99%

Having gone through the "Two Front System", we have ended up with the same autocrat who is trying to implement the same policies he introduced in 1981. Furthermore, PH has succeeded in forcing PAS to ally more closely to Umno especially after GE14. It is time for all who have hoped for real reforms in Malaysia to build a 'Third Progressive Force' for a truly just, democratic and sustainable future that BN and PH have failed to provide.

Thus, at the by-election in Semenyih, PSM can spearhead a long-overdue 'Third Progressive Force' to offer a non-racial, progressive and sustainable alternative to BN 1.0 and BN 2.0 for the future generations of Malaysians:

End to Racism & Racial Discrimination in Malaysia - Perhaps the strongest reason for going beyond the Two Front System is the fact that both BN and PH are dominated by race-based political parties to gain votes and popularity. The new component of PH is the race-pure PPBM which considers itself the "real" champion of the "Bumiputera Agenda" in contrast to Umno. Consequently, none of the political parties in either of the two coalitions have raised the question of when the racially discriminatory New Economic Policy, that was scheduled to end in 1990, will end. The Progressive Alliance calls for needs-based and not race-based policies. An Equality Act will make racially discriminatory policies a thing of the past and equality will become an intrinsic part of the Human Rights Commission. The Progressive Alternative that we are trying to build takes human rights seriously and respects all Malaysian citizens irrespective of ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender or sexuality so that we can march forward as a nation.

Wealth redistribution for the 99% - Both BN & PH are competing to see which coalition can outdo the other in neo-liberal policies that offer investors attractive opportunities that they can't refuse, implementing 'development' projects that involve carving out forests, reclaiming land and colonising other assets in our public commons. We do not see these coalitions putting forward sound policies to redistribute wealth in this country. Do they propose progressive fiscal policies to tax the top 1% who own more wealth than the bottom 40% and the middle 40% in our country such as higher marginal tax rates on income, capital gains, inheritance and luxuries? The wealth of the richest 50 Malaysians (top 0.00017%) amounts to nearly RM300 billion which is a quarter of the country's total GDP of RM1 trillion!

Affordable public housing, health, transport & education - A just, democratic and progressive alternative calls for a living wage and rights for all workers; a reasonable pension at retirement, for all; affordable and liveable public housing; affordable and efficient public health and transport; free tertiary education (means-tested for the well-off), etc. We want to reclaim our public assets from privatisation, halt any further privatisation of public assets, nationalise public utilities such as water and energy and democratise the GLCs; apportion more revenue from oil and gas resources to the oil and gas-producing states and ensure Petronas' oil and gas production and investment records are transparent and accountable to parliament and the public.

PH's attempts at resolving housing and health issues have invariably involved private crony companies which were privy to the plans just like BN when our housing and health issues need to be solved through public sector involvement.

Thus, with the new PH government becoming a BN 2.0 version, only by building a Third Progressive Force can we take our country into a brighter future based on equality, justice, democracy and human rights.

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