

Socialist Party of Malaysia on the meltdown of the Pakatan Harapan government

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After a week of political crisis, betrayals and rapidly shifting alliances, former MP and Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) chairperson Jeyakumar Devaraj reflected on recent events with *Green Left*.

Most people have been bewildered by these events, Jeyakumar explained in his characteristically calm manner, but it starts to make sense if we look at the interests and intentions of the main players: former Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir; Mohamed Azmin Ali, the leader of the split from the multiracial People's Justice Party (PKR), the biggest party in the Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan, PH); PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim; and Muhyiddin Yassin, who has been appointed PM by Malaysia's king. Yassin has yet to be tested for majority support in the parliament, which is scheduled to resume on March 9.

Mahathir and the new Malay capitalist class

Jeyakumar sees Mahathir at the centre of the recent developments. "Since the 1960s, Mahathir has made no secret of his belief that for an ethnic group to succeed in the modern era it needed its share of scientists, bankers, professionals, business people and millionaires — a modern bourgeoisie.

"In his assessment, merely preserving the old Malay elite comprising the feudal aristocracy, landlords and the royalty wouldn't be enough for the Malays to hold their own in the modern world. There needed to be a Malay capitalist class.

"He has spent the major portion of his life in developing this class by hook or by crook and succeeded to an extent.

Mahathir believed that the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which had dominated government since independence in 1957, could not be reformed from within. Those in power were too entrenched, so he needed to join up with PH to "cleanse UMNO of the crooks".

He was also worried that PH leaders would not protect and promote this nascent Malay capitalist class.

So Mahathir brought in MPs from UMNO to bolster his own Bersatu party. He also made Azmin a federal minister "thereby exacerbating the friction between Anwar and Azmin", so that if Bersatu could not be bolstered up enough to play a defining role in Pakatan Harapan, a weakened PH would lose to UMNO (cleansed of the worst kleptocrats) in the next general election.

Mahathir did not countermand former PH finance minister Lim Guan Eng's decision in 2018 to axe the subsidy payments of RM300 a month to more than 70,000 traditional fishers and the rubber price support system that kicked in and supported 200,000 rubber smallholders each time the price of scrap rubber dipped below RM2.20 a kilogram.

“Mahathir could have highlighted to Guan Eng the political folly of cutting these subsidies given that the PH had only garnered less than 20% of the rural Malay vote. However Mahathir kept quiet on this issue, probably thinking to himself: ‘Go ahead if you want to shoot yourself in the foot!’”

Azmin’s ‘coup’

Azmin’s “back-door coup” on February 22 threw Mahathir’s plans into disarray.

Azmin is now seen as the villain of the piece by many Malaysians as he set into motion the events that led to the unraveling of the PH government, says Jeyakumar.

But it is useful to look at the situation from Azmin’s perspective. “Azmin was Anwar’s trusted lieutenant since the *Reformasi* days (1998). He did prison time because of his association with Anwar.

“He stayed faithful to the cause even when the PKR did badly in 2004 and was reduced to a single seat in parliament.

But when the wind changed and the opposition took five state governments in 2008, Anwar put Khalid Ibrahim, a former UMNO politician who had just crossed over to the PKR a few months earlier, into the post of chief minister of the state of Selangor, a post that Azmin wanted.

In 2014, Anwar again attempted to block Azmin’s ascent to the same post, but this time Azmin managed to outfox Anwar.

“At every PKR election – 2010, 2014 and in 2018 – Azmin went for the deputy president position. He never challenged Anwar or Wan Azizah for the post of president. Anwar always kept backing challengers to Azmin – but tellingly, they all lost.”

Jeyakumar thinks Anwar did this because he feared that Azmin would emerge as a challenger to him as PKR leader.

“For Azmin, the outcome of the meeting of PH’s presidential council on February 21 was a disaster,” said Jeyakumar. It meant that Anwar would probably become PM within a year. Azmin had a lot to lose if that happened so he launched a pre-emptive strike.

“But Azmin had seriously misread Mahathir’s game plan. He didn’t realise that for Mahathir, cleansing UMNO by removing the worst kleptocrats had to be done before power could be passed back to UMNO.”

The ascension of UMNO to the ruling position might lead to the dropping or watering down of charges against the very people Mahathir came out of retirement to defeat. Jeyakumar says Mahathir’s flip-flops in the week after the coup are quite understandable if viewed from this perspective.

Anwar a ‘tragic figure’

Jeyakumar sees Anwar as a tragic figure in the current saga.

“Anwar has made huge contributions to Malaysian politics. In 1998, after his expulsion from government, he combatted Mahathir without using the race card or religion, but by focusing on governance, fighting corruption, asking for justice for all and welfare for the poor.

"He is well-read and his views on Islam are much more inclusive of non-Muslims.

"Anwar has paid a huge personal price for challenging the UMNO political establishment. He was stripped of his Deputy PMship, charged for sodomy and humiliated publicly and jailed twice after trials that did not seem fair.

"But he has had a lot of difficulty in keeping his friends and allies. Apart from Azmin there are several other political leaders who, after working closely with Anwar for a period, parted company acrimoniously.

"It is no secret that many PKR leaders, including a score of PKR MPs, who were formerly loyal to Anwar, took Azmin's side in the power tussle between the two.

At the same time, Mahathir has never recanted his earlier statements that Anwar is not a fit person to be the PM, although he also promised to hand over PMship to Anwar.

Muhyiddin yet to be tested

Muhyiddin was appointed PM by the king on February 29 but it is yet to be proved that he has majority support in parliament.

"Muhyiddin was formerly sacked from the post of deputy PM and from UMNO because of his opposition to the misuse of public funds by the then PM. He then teamed up with Mahathir and contested the 2018 elections as part of PH and his party was rewarded quite richly with cabinet positions. Yet, now, he breaks from PH and teams up with UMNO leaders, including those who played a role in sacking him.

"What drove Muhyiddin and the Bersatu MPs to re-join a coalition with the very people they rebelled against not so long ago?

"Perhaps they saw PH as a losing wicket as far as building Malay political support. Perhaps it was the perception that the PH is undermining the 'Malay Agenda' by trimming subsidies to poorer sectors, promoting market-based solutions and downsizing the public sector."

Whatever their reasons, Jeyakumar thinks it is clear that PH lost the "propaganda battle for the hearts and minds of the Malay population" over the course of less than two years in government.

PH needed to have done more for the poorest 40% (B40) of Malays, he said.

"It could, for instance, have kept the allocations for the rural B40 constant while ensuring full transparency so that the local communities could monitor the implementation of the various projects such as repairing houses, building more affordable housing, repairing prayer rooms and community halls, etc.

"This process remains so opaque that the local population is unable to check if a percentage of the allocation is being siphoned out by local elites."

"In urban areas, PH workers could have had meetings with low-cost flat residents documented the maintenance work and repairs needed and applied to the local government for funds to do repairs. A large percentage of urban poor live in these high rise slums. Making these flats more inhabitable would have won PH a lot of support.

"Our elderly are struggling. An universal pension of RM300 per month to all those above the age of

70, without pension of any sort and assets of more than RM100,000, would only cost about RM3 billion a year. It would have brought much relief and won PH considerable support.”

If such strategies had been followed, said Jeyakumar, the PH would now be in a position to challenge the usurpers in parliament and win a new election.

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