

Malaysia: The problem with liberal policy

Thursday 18 August 2022, by [KATHIRTCHELVAN Arveent](#) (Date first published: 9 August 2022).

I read recently Wan Fayhsal's take on how Pakatan Harapan's liberalism alienates them from the Malays who need a "protector" aligned with their identity politics. It is interesting for a Marxist to read this as it shows clearly how right-wing actors manipulate the real problems with liberal politics to sell themselves as the only alternative. This, of course, is a larger strategy of capitalism, where capitalists support both liberals and conservatives to manufacture consent for either from the masses, whereas both serve only to expand and protect capital. Let me be clear.

I have written [extensively](#) how much I detest representative democracy as it is practiced in Malaysia. The masses are largely distanced from the corridors of power. Democracy has been reduced to voting once every 5 years with no associated powers deferred to the common Malaysian to affect any political improvement in the interim. Unionisation rates are hovering around 6%, local council elections have been abolished and there is no such thing as recall elections. Mainstream politics is run by parties backed by and protect capital such that the will of the masses is betrayed for selfish reasons. For the common Malaysian, liberal democracy in Malaysia is alienating and disempowering.

The so-called progressive political parties in Malaysia do not truly want an end to this alienation, as it is precisely this alienation that protects capital, the source of their power. Fighting this alienation will involve organizing the masses into unions and associations to fight for their rights. We must also move away from the capitalist mode of production which will inevitably lead to a concentration of power with elites. This allows them to utilise whatever methods to further manipulate policies to their benefit. In this sense, the liberation of the masses necessarily is the establishment of socialism, the only logical way forward.

The alienating nature of the economic and political systems inherent to capitalism causes the masses to suffer from the expropriation of their labour which is compensated minimally. Not only this, the avenues by which they can attempt to rectify this are also restricted. The failure of progressives to realise this, or perhaps more accurately the willful association of these progressives with capital knowingly to the detriment to the masses, has caused a loss of faith in the masses towards them.

Of course, it was not the progressives that held power for most of its history, it was conservatives. This group has used the alienation of capital to strengthen themselves by diverting the root cause of it to another group. In Malaysia, Malay conservative political parties shifted the blame to the non-Malays and their control of the economy. Historically, there has been attempts to rectify this not by socializing the means of production and enriching the masses, rather seeking to create as many Bumiputera billionaires as possible, particularly with the extreme neoliberalism Mahathir brought. This shows the perversion of the conservative line, trying to solve a problem created by capitalism by becoming even more capitalist.

Now, Wan Fayhsal, the scion of Mahathirism, has come out to push forward the tired narrative of patronage as another solution to the problems of the current system the progressives are unable to address. He does not, of course, honestly analyse the material conditions of Malaysia, does not

identify the root cause of apathy and disillusionment as caused by the constant class war being waged against the marhaen, but classifies the Malay electorate as wanting a protector. Wan Fayhsal does not even acknowledge that the supposed need for protection is a right-wing ruse to spook the Malay electorate into fearing for their way of life.

This works so well due to the alienation that exists within capitalism. People are made to feel powerless against the whims of capitalists. They are made to suffer with the increasing exploitation of their employers extracting evermore labour for decreasing pay. Especially in the third world, for countries and MNCs in the Global North to keep profit rates growing, wages, labour benefits and taxes are pushed down as more countries are incorporated within the global supply chain. This also is exacerbated by the increasing cost of living due to, again, more private profiteering particularly within the housing sector.

The socioeconomic pressure that is put on ordinary Malaysians was not sufficiently addressed by conservatives, coming to a head in 2018 when they finally lost an election, driven primarily by economic concerns deriving from the implementation of the GST and economic implications of the 1MDB scandal. It is of particular note that the manifesto of Pakatan Harapan in 2018 particularly contained many economic promises, including abolishing GST, abolishing tolls, subsidizing petrol and increasing minimum wage. The masses voted on economic terms.

However, what the Pakatan Harapan government achieved was, in a large part, contradictory to their promises, with the minimum wage initially only being increased by RM 50, tolls not being abolished and the PTPTN repayment deferment not being implemented. This, coupled with PH's inability to effectively address the strengthening of BN and PAS who capitalized on the discontent on the ground by converging around opposing ICERD and the Rome Statute to play the role of saviours against the tyrannical "liberal" government.

The people who BN and PAS successfully mobilized are the same people who threw them out a year prior. The underlying concerns that synergized them are the same concerns that synergized them in 2018. Socioeconomics. BN and PAS, as they have done for over 60 years, used this to sell their narrative of unique Malay-Muslim suffering, successfully reviving a racialized lens. If PH had been the government that they promised to be and quickly implemented their economic promises, there would not have been so much support for BN and PAS. However, PH could not have implemented these promises as they can only be implemented by an anti-capitalist government, which PH is not, especially not when Mahathir was Prime Minister.

This is where I agree with Wan Fayhsal that liberal politics as Pakatan Harapan have practiced can never deliver them lasting power. The most it can lead to is only pyrrhic victories like in 2018 that will be dismantled by fascist forces. More likely, PH will find themselves slowly being transformed into conservatives themselves, just as how Wan Fayhsal advises them too. If we are being honest, we can see elements of the racial lens being used within PH as well, most famously their rehabilitation of Mahathir to seek Malay votes and, to a lesser extent, Kulasegaran's racist remarks that he will only eat in Indian restaurants during the Rantau by-election.

What we need is a complete break from liberal, capitalist politics. We need to embrace completely proletarian, socialist politics. This is where we fight alongside the masses on their issues. We must build dual power structures, such as unions and people's associations, that can successfully fight against capital through organizing the masses. We must push for decoupling the economy from private hands to a collective ownership of the masses with proper controls, such as co-operatives and worker-run organisations. We must recognize private capital as the enemy, educate workers on the fact that the value that they are producing is being stolen from them and push forth the class narrative. This and this alone can defeat the racial lens of the conservatives.

Liberal politics has had its time in the sun. It has shown itself to be an abject failure and has only resulted in even more united and powerful right-wing. It is time for proletarian politics.

Arveent Kathirtchelvan Chairperson, Socialist Youth, Parti Sosialis Malaysia

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Think Left

<https://thinkleft.net/2022/04/09/the-problem-with-liberal-policy/>