

Malaysia: Newly launched People's Alliance claims it is ready to topple government

Sunday 20 April 2008, by [ARUTCHELVAN S.](#), [BOYLE Peter](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2008).

April 18, 2008 — There have been dramatic developments in Malaysia since the ruling National Front (Barisan Nasional - BN) government had its majority in parliament reduced sharply in general elections on March 8. Opposition parties, which won five out of 13 state governments, formed a new People's Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat) on April 1. Police disrupted a large opposition rally on April 14 to mark the end of the government's five year ban on opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim participating in politics. Anwar claimed at the rally he now has enough defections from government MPs to form a federal government but will not make the move until he increases his majority. At this stage, the People's Alliance comprises the Justice Party (Parti Keadilan - PKR), the Islamic Party (PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP).

Peter Boyle interviewed S. Arutchelvan, the secretary general of the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) on April 18. The PSM won a state and a federal seat in the recent election, running under the logo of the Justice Party because the government refused the PSM registration as a political party, having branded it a ``threat to national security''.

You were present at the police disrupted April 14 opposition rally addressed by Anwar Ibrahim last week. Can you describe what happened?

It was a huge rally, drawing easily more than 20,000. The crowd was very well behaved throughout the program, which was held in an open-air sports complex. The speeches besides Anwar's were very short. Around 10.20pm, about 20 police personnel moved towards the rostrum while Anwar was still speaking. The crowd was irritated with the police interference. Anwar spoke to the police, told the crowd to be calm and then he announced that he was ending his speech. He thanked everyone. The crowd then dispersed peacefully.

At 6.30am the next morning, the police went to serve 111 notices to four leaders of Pakatan Rakyat including the new chief minister of Selangor state, Khalid Ibrahim, and PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Ismail. This is sheer harassment and an infringement of the freedom of assembly.

Anwar is reported by the media as claiming that there are enough defections to the opposition from the BN government to allow the People's Alliance to form government. Is this true, in your opinion? If so what would be the likely make-up of such a government and what proportions would PKR, PAS and DAP hold in it?

Anwar seems to be very confident when he made that statement, which has been drawing lots of comments in the local news. There definitely seems to be such a situation, especially in parties belonging to the ruling BN in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). In these states, there has been a history of political defections. BN is even talking about passing a "anti-hopping" law to block defections. However, over many years, the government has happily benefited from people "hopping" to BN!

There is definitely a chance of people defecting to the opposition but at the same time, I don't think

BN is going to let it happen so easily. On the sidelines, former PM Mohamed Mahathir is trying his best to get rid of PM Abdullah Badawi and replace him to safeguard his own interests. Mahathir and many others in the ruling party are quite convinced that the only way to save BN is to get rid of Badawi. If UMNO [United Malays National Organisation, the biggest party in the BN] deputy leader Najib Razak takes over, there is a threat that he will use repression and the use of emergency laws.

I think, if the defection from BN is very large and Anwar gets the full backing of the kings [Malaysia has several kings who take turns as head of state] and the army/police, he would be able to take government. If Pakatan Rakyat wins government, Anwar would lead it and form a multi-party government. I am also confident that the people will fight back if there is an attempt to clamp down on Pakatan Rakyat.

What would be the political character of such a government?

It would be popular. They would bring some immediate reforms like abolishing the repressive Internal Security Act (ISA) and allow the freedom of the media and register parties like the PSM. On the other hand, a world recession is imminent and people might later blame it on the new government. That would be a big challenge. But since the Pakatan Rakyat is made up of parties with very different ideologies - PAS and DAP, for example - it will take the special skills of Anwar to get things moving. He certainly has these skills, as we experienced when he conducted the seat negotiations in the lead up to the elections.

What would the popular expectations on such a government be?

The civil society movement would expect the repeal of draconian laws like the ISA, Emergency Orders, Official Secrets Act, Sedition Act, University and Colleges Act [which bans politics from campuses], Printing and Presses Act and many others. They would demand reforms to the police force. Investors will look for a less corrupt government. The common people would expect fuel prices and inflation to go down, as well as lessening Malaysia's dependency on migrant labour.

How do you assess the actual and potential state of mobilisation of the popular masses at this stage? How hard are people prepared to struggle to bring down the BN?

Based on the interest of people in reading alternative news, the street discussions and popular sentiment, people are really happy at the recent course of developments and would fight the BN if there is a clear direction from the political parties. The opposition leaders are trying to hold down the uprising of the common people as they don't want the BN to use it as an excuse to clamp down. This is where we disagree with them. We think the people have to be made prepared to defend the election gains and go further.

Would a change of prime minister by the BN be enough to quiet the people? Is this in the wings?

This would confuse the situation but there is no clear Malay leader in UMNO who stands out with PM quality, but of course, going by Badawi's standards then anyone in UMNO could be a PM. But there is lots of hatred against Najib so I think a mere change in PM will not quieten the people.

What special challenges do you see this posing for the PSM and how has the PSM fared since the elections?

We face what every left movement faces in the world. You could say we also face the tensions between the theories of Marx and Mao. There is the question of getting rid of BN first as BN as seen as the primary enemy, however experiences in Indonesia and Philippines warn of the limits of this

approach. At this stage, we too have to be careful not to isolate ourselves from the general sentiment for change. We are using the situation now to build the party, to increase membership, sell more newspapers and, most importantly, having a clear understanding of the process and not getting carried away. We are also trying to build people's power in the areas we organise. For the record, Dr Nasir Hashim was the first state assembly member in the state of Selangor to organise a demonstration (against the building of a hyper market) straight after the elections.

We also face a critical task of being the political and integrity watchdog of the new Pakatan Rakyat. This is the expectation of most civil rights groups. They see the PSM as a very principled and consistent party, in spite of our small numbers.

You are mentioned in *The Edge* as “comparing Anwar to the populist Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, as the former has also called for a redistribution of petrodollars to the people”. Can you expand on this?

I was interviewed by *The Edge* before the election but I have yet to see the article. I think there are huge differences between Anwar and Chavez. Chavez I believe is building socialism whereas Anwar is merely trying to give a human face to capitalism. He believes that fighting corruption and emphasising good governance will solve the problem. We in the PSM feel that capitalism is beyond repair. It disrupts our lives and our environment. But we support strongly Anwar in fighting the NEP and bumiputera policy [which discriminates against the non-Malays]. We support his call for the people's supremacy over “Malay supremacy”. These are great positions and it will help us in uniting the various races and help us build the conditions for a class struggle politics.

Many socialists in other countries don't understand the Malaysian situation. Today we are not one nation in Malaysia — there is no nationhood. We are divided so strongly by race and religion. Many feel that we can only build socialism once we resolve the national question. This has been the biggest challenge for the left in Malaysia. Today we see some opportunity to make progress on this front.

For the PSM, the most important task is to stay relevant to the majority of the working class and to do hard work. We believe it is only through our hard work are we going to win the masses over. Sheer rhetoric is not going to win our battle. The left has been repressed and almost wiped out. But we have emerged from this and today socialism is respected and we can take some credit for this.

Going back Anwar and Chavez, the opposition manifesto is very attractive as it calls for civil rights, free education and health care. And Anwar has said that we are going to for pay it using Petronas [the state-owned oil company] money. Never has Anwar said that this is what Venezuela is doing, but the PSM never fails to mention in all our public talks that we should learn from Venezuela's revolution that it is possible.

Anwar's speech at the April 14 rally was interesting. He said Pakatan Rakyat is not merely trying to take over from BN but we are trying to overhaul and change the entire political system. We want the power to the people and not a few rich people. This sounds really good but it is too early to tell if it is more than words. We know that the only way out of capitalism is socialism.

***The Star* reports: “Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) will consider joining Pakatan Rakyat if offered a place in the opposition alliance, central committee member Dr D. Jeyakumar said.” Can you confirm this?**

Our current position is that we will continue to work with Pakatan Rakyat on a minimum program. A recent conclusion of the PSM internal party forum is that we should not join Pakatan Rakyat until

we have seen their full program. We will have to debate it first before agreeing. Comrade Jeyakumar was misquoted. He did say we will consider it if Pakatan Rakyat made a proposal. So far, there is an open invitation to any party (including BN!) to join Pakatan but there is no special request to the PSM. Meanwhile, we will work with the opposition forces to topple the BN. But if the Pakatan Rakyat goes against its own manifesto which we endorsed or takes anti-worker/ anti-people positions, we will have to oppose them as we are already doing on some issues.

P.S.

* From . S. Arutchelvan interviewed by Peter Boyle.

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