

Malaysian elections: boycott or not?

PSM leader says “keep an open mind”

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As general elections approach, Malaysian leftists are hesitating between between a boycott, and voting for the liberal-social democrat opposition coalition as the lesser of two evils.

Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) Central Committee member S Arutchelvan sympathises with those who propose spoiling their ballot papers in frustration with the lack of choice in Malaysia’s upcoming general election.

He noted that the campaign (associated with the hashtag #Undirosak) in part reflected the belief that neither the ruling National Front (Barisan Nasional) nor the opposition Pact for the Future (Pakatan Harapan) would bring systemic change. Both coalitions are broad, and stress their moderate credentials. The opposition has actively recruited disillusioned government politicians, including former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed. Recently appointed as the opposition candidate for Prime Minister, charismatic “Dr. M.” has strengthened the opposition’s secular credentials and is likely to encourage some poorer Moslems to switch allegiance from the corrupt and pro-business ruling parties towards the untested opposition coalition. However, many liberal and socialist activists deeply distrust Mahathir because of his authoritarian style, unresolved corruption scandals, and his unrepentant persecution of his former ally and fellow opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, currently imprisoned after an unfair trial and conviction for sodomy.

Arutchelvan recently reminded his FaceBook followers that Lenin believed that participation in elections was obligatory and a boycott should only happen if conditions were ripe for a revolution. “My personal stance is the left wing including the anarchists in this country are still weak and have yet to create a matured condition for change through the streets.”

Arutchelvan pointed out that in 1969, the socialist parties, Malaysian Labour Party and People’s Party (Parti Rakyat) boycotted the general election, which was seen as the wrong move that led to the rise of more moderate social democrat parties such as DAP and Gerakan, which still capture much of the left vote.

“If we want to change this system, all socialists, anarchists, the left, anti-capitalist, anti-feudalist and those who stand with the people must unite to build a new movement against mainstream politics that seek only to change the government but not the system,” he said. “So long as this new power is not built, then we are told that we have no choice but to vote for either Coke or Pepsi.”

Most liberal and leftist currents in Malaysia have thrown their support behind the opposition Pact for the Future, and are worried that any spoilt ballot or boycott initiative will play into the hands of the National Front, which has been in power continually since Malaysia gained its independence.

Nevertheless, Arutchelvan said the campaign to spoil votes in the general election should not be dismissed. He noted that he former chairperson of the clean elections movement Bersih, Ms Ambiga Sreenevasan has also cautioned against condemning such a move.

“No one should take for granted the maturity of the people who want to spoil their votes. This may be a protest or a new idea. For now, my stance is to keep an open mind to this campaign instead of opposing it.

I feel that it should be debated in a mature manner and with depth. We have to ask if it is better to have a new [opposition coalition] Pact for the Future government or [the incumbent] National Front,” he added.

Arutchelvan said the onus was on Pact for the Future to convince those who were against the ruling coalition, but are unsure about supporting the opposition coalition. “But I see Pact for the Future instead criticising and attacking those who are not of the same opinion and labelling those who criticise the opposition as having taken handouts from [Prime Minister] Najib Abdul Razak,” he said.

Arutchelvan said this opposition arrogance had only fuelled the desire by certain voters to want to spoil their votes. “Pact for the Future should be more humble and try to reach out to the groups that had for a long time fought the current government,” he said.

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