

Malaysia: The third force needs more than quality candidates

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The Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM)-Malaysian United Democracy Alliance (MUDA) third force foray in the 2023 state elections in Selangor, Terengganu, Negeri Sembilan and Pulau Pinang failed to garner enough votes for at least one candidate to save their deposit. This is an expected outcome. The First Past The Post system is such that large parties are disproportionately advantaged, especially as in the recent elections, only Pakatan Harapan (PH)-Barisan Nasional (BN) and Perikatan Nasional (PN) could form state governments. What would motivate the voter to vote another party, then?

We at PSM put forward our decades of service, solving thousands of cases for common people, winning hundreds of houses for plantation workers, many acres of land for farmers and thousands of ringgit in unpaid wages for workers. We stated our candidates can achieve tangible goals for the marhaen when elected, as they have done prior to being elected. Whilst we at PSM have shown the expression of democracy is greater than just voting and major achievements can be won outside of the corridors of power, voters still felt this was unconvincing.

From the conversations we have had with voters, whilst a lot supported our candidates, our work and our goals, they stated they would be voting for either PH-BN or PN for other reasons. These include the ability to determine the state government. PH-BN voters wanted to stop a Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) Menteri Besar (First Minister, MB) from being appointed whilst PN voters were determined to change the Selangor state government. The low number of seats PSM has contested did not inspire voters to shift from this mindset.

Tied to this is the lack of trust voters had in PSM candidates being able to achieve what we had promised. Our track record in being able to do so outside of parliament or any state assembly (DUN) was not fully understood as well. Finally, voters did not want to split their votes. Even those who held our candidates in high regard were too afraid to vote for us lest the other side wins. This is a lack of trust that our candidates would be able to garner enough votes to poll second place at least in front of the candidates they didn't want to win no matter what.

What does this experience teach us? Many of our detractors say it is time PSM dissolves as a political party and becomes an NGO. MUDA gets the same "advice", most recently from Lim Kit Siang to merge with Democratic Action Party (DAP). However, PSM is not just an electoral party. We are a grassroots organisation that empowers workers, Orang Asli and other oppressed people of Malaysia through building alternative power structures.

Our front, Gabungan Marhaen, unites different groups such as contract workers, ranchers, farmers, plantation workers and gig-economy workers to find alternative ways in solving their problems. This model has been extremely successful in materially benefitting these people through winning cases. We have also affected legislative change such as the introduction of the Minimum Wage Order and Employment Insurance Scheme, both coming from PSM campaigns. All in all, we are in a good place.

Perhaps the largest obstacle that stands between us and electoral victory is a lack of exposure of these successes. Unfortunately, though we try our best, we neither have the resources nor the sensationalism required for media attention. Hence, we are tasked with the unenviable job of popularising ourselves whilst consistently working cases, all with a fraction of the resources other parties have. Recently, our social media presence has grown with this understanding and we are confident we will grow further as we search for creative ways in marketing ourselves.

That being said, I believe that the third-force must find a convincing counter to the greater overall narrative we find ourselves against whenever elections roll around. How do we answer voters who challenge us on how we will be able to change anything if we aren't part of the government? How do we convince voters that we are not put into certain seats just to split votes? One way we can do so is by expanding the seats we are contesting to numbers enough to form the government, at least in certain states.

Imagine if PSM and MUDA had contested all 56 seats in Selangor and had named a Menteri Besar candidate. At the very least we would have gotten a lot more press coverage. Our experience so far is that we have had to focus on the larger coalitions as well, due to the simple fact that it is what is moving their readers. Of course, even then both PSM and MUDA got our fair share of coverage. Contesting in those numbers would also help to remove the anxiety of voters who either believe our candidates may back the larger coalition they do not support or that we would not be able to keep our promises once we have won.

This sounds like tailism, of course. But I am not advocating for PSM (or MUDA) to abandon our grassroots organising to fully become an electoral party. Far from it! PSM was formed from the grassroots as a political wing of the movement. It is in our DNA to build alternative power structures that will one day challenge the very system which disenfranchises and disadvantages the voice of the common people. Gabungan Marhaen will thrive. We will build more associations, support more unions and take the challenge to sitting governments for reforms and overhauls. Were the boardroom fails, the streets will win.

But for polls, the people have spoken. We are failing to translate our organisation work convincingly for voters to choose us. Whilst I believe we are also failing to get the word out to as many people as possible, those who have heard of us even have expressed there are roadblocks to them voting for us. So, we should be bolder and field more candidates. As many candidates as possible. And for PSM that is a huge task, as we do not just field anyone. Candidates have to be local activists who have served the community for many years. We are adamant in ensuring the quality of candidates never drops. But I believe we have more people to field, and there is now time for us to build teams around them whilst furthering communication.

One day, when we get to name a Menteri Besar candidate for Selangor, we will be taken seriously. Ditto for any other state. We understand this fully. Hence, our supporters out there, we are calling out to you now, especially where we haven't stood before or have branches, it is time to close ranks. We need you to join us and expand our struggle. We do not want to disappoint you further, help us name candidates in your seats. Together, we will achieve electoral success, as we have tasted successes in all other areas.

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