

PSM's Bawani KS: Building a third force in Malaysian politics

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Elections across six states in Malaysia resulted in a continuation of the status quo on August 12 as Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's unity government and the Perikatan Nasional (PN) opposition each retained three states.

The Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) also contested the elections, for the first time cooperating with the youth-based Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), in a bid to counter the growing race- and religion-based politics in the country.

The PSM stood four candidates in the election, including PSM deputy chairperson S. Arutchelvan, PSM general secretary Sivarajan Arumugam, Sivaranjani Manickam and Dr Darren Ong.

PSM deputy secretary general Bawani KS told *Green Left* that despite not winning any seats, the "public support for a third force is there".

Bawani explained that Ibrahim's unity government, which was elected last year, is an alliance of the centre-left Pakatan Harapan party and the right-wing Barisan Nasional (BN) party, which was previously in power.

"Suddenly to form government the progressive party had to unite with the right wing, which is against the democratic system.

"Now, many people do not have a choice because in place of the Pakatan government, they have put a BN candidate. People don't like the right wing."

Malaysia does not have a preferential voting system, which makes it more difficult for smaller parties to win votes. Many people said they wanted to vote for the PSM but did not want to risk the PN opposition coming to power, Bawani said.

The unity government and PN opposition both campaigned with fear mongering tactics that utilised racial and religion-based fears to scare voters into sticking with them. Creating what one PSM volunteer [described on Twitter](#) as a "football match". "They're so scared of not being in control, they don't care about scoring a goal anymore ... they keep the ball to themselves instead of passing it to the next person."

Alliance with MUDA

A rejection of this race-based politics was the first of five shared concerns that the PSM and MUDA agreed to campaign on as part of their election pact. The others include: a commitment to "uplift the lives of the majority and marginalised people"; a call for "genuine democracy"; "balanced and inclusive development"; and urgent environmental action.

MUDA is a self-described centre-left party. Muda means “young” in Malay. *MUDA* admitted that its policy platform is not as developed as the PSM’s, but found much to agree on in the lead up to the election.

“PSM made a collaboration with MUDA for this election, we have a common understanding so that our candidates do not contest the same seats,” Bawani explained.

“We are trying to bring a new politics to Malaysia and we feel that MUDA has similar demands to us. It is also very important because MUDA is connected to the youth.

“A lot of young people don’t like ‘A’ and ‘B’, Pepsi and Cola, and are looking for an alternative.

“PSM and MUDA can work together to bring especially the young people together to put forward the people’s agenda.”

Bawani told *GL* that cost-of-living was one of the key issues going into the state elections, along with housing

“60% of the population are talking about the living costs getting very high, and the salaries are not equivalent to people’s expenses,” she explained.

“Another thing is the housing prices; now most young people cannot own their home. Normal people, who are earning B40 [the bottom 40% of incomes] cannot afford housing.

“Young people are graduating with so many debts, and now they cannot get a loan for a home as well. Unemployment is also increasing, particularly among the young.”

Post election campaigns

One of the PSM’s key campaigns is the fight for a public pension system of RM500 a month for people aged 65 years and older. Malaysia has a largely privatised pension system.

PSM chairman Dr Jeyakumar Devaraj told *GL* that many people lost a lot of their retirement funds during the COVID-19 pandemic and that a pension system would allow senior citizens to live a “dignified” life.

“This is something we are fighting for across the country,” Bawani explained. “We can draw inspiration from our campaign for a minimum wage which we fought for more than 20 years. Now we have a legislated minimum wage.

“We can also draw inspiration from our successful campaign for an insurance scheme for workers.

Bawani said the PSM would also be focussing on solutions to the housing crisis, making education more accessible, cost-of-living and health.

“Education is a fundamental right, it is a right of every citizen to get education for free; it is not a business or a political football to juggle. The PSM will restart this campaign now the elections are over.

“These are the issues being faced everyday by ordinary people.

“Of course we have a long way to go, there is a lot of work waiting for us to empower the people and bring different politics to Malaysia.”

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