

Malaysian socialists say Anwar Ibrahim by-election victory a 'marker of massive change'

Tuesday 2 September 2008, by [DEVARAJ \(Dr\) Michael Jeyakumar](#) (Date first published: 31 August 2008).

The landslide victory by Justice Party leader Anwar Ibrahim in the August 26 Permatang Pauh by-election is welcomed in this commentary by Dr Jeyakumar Devaraj, the first federal parliamentarian of the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM), as a "marker of the massive change" and another development that will open up democratic space in Malaysia.

The by-election results in Permatang Pauh, a semi-rural constituency in the northern state of Penang, is yet another marker of the massive change that is taking place in Malaysian politics. Usually by-elections are won handsomely by the Barisan National (BN) government because the BN will approve millions of ringgit in development projects, deploy all its main leaders in the campaign and use the subservient media to the fullest. This was attempted in Permatang Pauh this time around.

The deputy prime minister, Najib Abdul Razak, camped out in Permatang Pauh for the entire course of the campaign, leading a team of leaders from various BN component parties.

The BN campaign portrayed Anwar as someone who would sell out Malay interests in his hurry to become the sixth prime minister of Malaysia — that he would roll back the affirmative action policies, trade off important cabinet positions to non-Malays. The BN also used the media to play on non-Malay fears that the presence of the Islamic Party (PAS) in the opposition coalition would accelerate the Islamisation of Malaysian society.

Normally, such arguments, coupled with the million-dollar goodies thrown in the way of voters would be sufficient to win handsomely in by-elections. But it failed woefully in Permatang Pauh.

Anwar, and the other leaders of the Pakatan Rakyat (the Peoples' Pact), campaigned on a non-racial basis. The Pakatan Rakyat would look after the poorer sectors of all the communities; there would be a new agenda to help all the needy and not merely the well-connected cronies and the economy would be reprioritised to meet the needs of the people.

However on polling day, Anwar received 31,195 votes to the BN candidate's 15,524. The voters of Permatang Pauh rejected the racial politicking that has worked so well for the BN all this while. This is the significance of the Permatang Pauh victory – the people are no longer responding to the ethnic divide-and-rule tactics that the ruling coalition has used all this while.

How is the PSM positioning itself?

Anwar is not a socialist by any stretch of the imagination. He does not see the need to challenge the existing relations between the advanced economies and the developing regions of the world. He believes that an efficiently managed Malaysia would be able to thrive in the globalised economy. He does not see any contradiction between his often repeated promise to attend to the needs of the poorer sectors, and his party's stand that Malaysian economic development should be driven by

private-sector investment.

However, at this point in time, the coalition led by Anwar (PR, the Pakatan Rakyat) is by far the more progressive of the two factions within the Malaysian elite which are now engaged in a life-or-death battle for federal power. In addition to the PR's relatively non-racial stance, the PR has promised that it would dismantle some of the more draconian laws curtailing human rights in Malaysia, such as the dreaded Internal Security Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Printing Act and several others.

The PR leaders are not yet tied into the system of lucrative crony contracts to keep their business conglomerations thriving.

At the same time, we have to accept the fact that the left in Malaysia today is not in a position to proclaim: "Neither the BN nor the PR. Both of them have capitalist orientations. Choose the PSM, we are the only force with a socialist alternative."

This slogan would sound nice but would not reflect the actual situation. Having said that, PSM would also not just join the bandwagon; we would go into a minimum program.

For these reasons, the PSM welcomes a transition from BN rule to PR rule at the federal level. It would open up the space for the political work that we need to do. The displacement of the BN at federal level will also emancipate Malaysian society from the deeply ingrained misconception that Malaysia cannot manage without BN rule.

The PSM therefore endorsed the PR campaign at Permatang Pauh and at the national level. Mohd Nasir, the PSM chairperson, led a group of PSM members to support Anwar on nomination day. As the PSM's sole federal parliamentarian, I went with a contingent of 15 PSM stalwarts to campaign for Anwar for a day. Another team from Subang went there for two days. Our Penang branch also distributed leaflets as well as sold party newspapers.

The PSM's support of the PR will continue, and might become crucial if there is any attempt by desperate elements within the BN to attempt a coup to suspend the parliamentary process by declaring a national emergency and rule through a joint police-military council. This is one of the possible scenarios, and the PSM has already begun discussing with the political parties within the PR how we could respond to such an attempt should it occur.

However, if and when the PR succeeds in capturing power at the federal level, the differences between the PSM and the PR will become more apparent, and we will then need to re-position ourselves as the nucleus of a critical caucus within the ruling coalition. No doubt this will require deep and on-going discussion regarding tactics.

We will have to cross those bridges when we come to them.

P.S.

* From <http://www.parti-sosialis.org/>