

# Cracks in Malaysia's Opposition Coalition

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## **Despite continuing to win by-elections, organizational difficulties abound**

The forces that have held Malaysia's unwieldy Pakatan Rakyat coalition together for the last 15 months appear to be fraying, with the opposition coalition foundering on the ethnic and philosophical differences between the constituent parties.

The coalition is made up of the urban largely ethnic Malay Parti Keadilan Rakyat, the rural fundamentalist Islamic Parti Islam se-Malaysia and the mostly Chinese Democratic Action Party. About all that has held the three together was a desire to oust the ruling Barisan Nasional from its 50-year hold on power.

*"There are inherent differences not only within the coalition itself but most of all within Parti Keadilan," says one source. "Keadilan itself is made up of three disparate groups — ex-UMNO types, ex-Abim (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement, from which Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim sprang before he joined the United Malays National Organisation in the 1980s) and various non-government organizations." This underscores a major failing, "the source says. "Anwar is a great orator, a guy capable of inspiring people, but a poor organizer. He hasn't been doing a good job in holding together Keadilan, let alone Pakatan Rakyat. Not surprisingly, because Anwar isn't working on minimizing the inherent differences, there is a palpable sense of drift in both Keadilan and Pakatan Rakyat."*

Given these problems new Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has moved aggressively to try to woo back enough opposition members to reclaim some of the five states lost to the Pakatan Rakyat in the March 2008 national elections. The same election cost the ruling coalition its two-thirds majority in the parliament.

There have been continuing indications that the coalition was troubled. But the biggest one appeared two weeks ago when Hadi Awang and Nasharuddin Mat Isa, the president and deputy president of PAS, respectively, after the party's annual general meeting openly mused about a unity coalition with UMNO. Then, last week, PAS's spiritual leader Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, agreed in principle with the idea of unity talks, as long as they centered on Islamic issues. Ultimately, after a meeting on Monday, the Pakatan coalition agreed to stay together and for PAS to reject any contacts with UMNO. PAS leaders called UMNO un-Islamic. But that doesn't mean the strains won't continue.

Ever since the 2008 elections, the country's politics have been fracturing. The once almost monolithic Malay vote, which UMNO could count on without any concerns, has eroded badly, with UMNO now taking hardly more than half, as ethnic Malays, disillusioned with corruption, have fled to the urban PKR as well as in large numbers to PAS despite its fundamentalist Islamic roots and traditionally rural northeastern base.

That has created tensions within PAS itself, as the so-called Terengganu faction of rural fundamentalists have seen their power eroded by the more moderate urban Malay rank and file. It

appears to be those tensions that have driven Hadi and Nashruddin into thinking of a coalition with UMNO to preserve Malay power.

For Pakatan, the defection of PAS could be an enormous problem, although leaders are trying to put a good spin on a bad situation.

*"I think a split is possible though it would be quite a dramatic solution," says a top Pakatan source. "Personally I think this isn't a bad idea because I think those who split will be deeply punished in an election. I think if there was a constituency that was being contested by PAS linked to UMNO vs. Pakatan, the people would vote for Pakatan. I think if there was a constituency within PAS aligned to Pakatan versus UMNO and the Barisan, people would stick with the Pakatan faction. A small group of Pakatan and PAS leaders discussed this last week, and we felt that in the current climate, if PAS did do a deal with UMNO they would not come out of that unscathed."*

The fissures, *thoguh*, are real. Ethnic Malays in opposition find themselves growing irritated with the Democratic Action Party, which has been moving aggressively to assert Chinese prerogatives. In addition, Anwar has from the start called for the abolition of Malay privilege under the New Economic Policy, an affirmative action program guaranteeing ethnic Malays a wide range of educational and other benefits.

There is also an element in PAS, a source says, which is extremely concerned about the issue of Malay rights. Others, particularly the Terengganu faction, believe they could be bigger players in a PAS-UMNO government than in one led by Anwar, especially given Anwar's advocacy of greater rights for non-Muslims and more personal, political and religious freedom.

*"I think PAS is sending a strong signal to Anwar that they are fed up and unhappy with him," says a long-time source with a Malaysian think-tank. "PAS may be calculating that UMNO needs PAS more than Keadilan — given Anwar's cavalier treatment of PAS. DAP leaders like Karpal Singh have been more open in criticizing Anwar and calling on him to resign. There have been lots of complaints among Pakatan leaders that Anwar makes decisions without consulting his allies."*

Although Keadilan won more parliamentary seats in 2008, the source says he believes that organizationally PAS is far stronger.

*"The caliber of PAS MPs and state assemblymen is far better and they are far more committed to the party, whereas some Keadilan guys are highly suspect and could cross over to UMNO given the right incentive or disincentive," he said.*

That happened earlier this year in the state of Perak, where three assembly members crossed over to the Barisan Nasional, precipitating an ongoing crisis. With PAS members solidly committed at that point to the opposition coalition, the source says, that angered the Islamic party considerably.

Two of the five by-elections held since the national election were triggered by Keadilan problems. In Kedah, the Keadilan assemblyman resigned in a sex scandal. The Keadilan Deputy Chief Minister in Penang (Anwar's home state) was forced out by his Keadilan colleagues, who were eyeing his position. Both irritated PAS leaders who had to gear up to spend resources in elections.

*"That speaks volumes about Anwar's ability to size up a person's personality and capability," the source says. "Anwar dithered about the deputy chief minister for so long that Lim Guan Eng, the DAP Chief Minister, made known publicly his exasperation with Anwar. And needless to say, PAS is furious that Perak was lost, because two of the three who crossed over to UMNO are from Keadilan. The 3<sup>rd</sup> is from the DAP."*

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The problem for elements of PAS that would consider a unity coalition with UMNO is that the Pakatan Rakyat keeps winning by-elections. Another is due in Kelantan on July 14, deep in the heart of PAS country. In the most recent Penang by-election, UMNO decided not to contest the seat because of the certainty it would lose. If UMNO contests this one, the party is likely to lose again.

Whatever organizational problems are engendered by Anwar & Co., it appears voter disillusionment with UMNO is continuing.

The coalition members might want to consider that before they break up.

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