

Where is Parti Sosialis Malaysia Headed?

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The Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) is one of the few Malaysian political parties which undertakes social activism as its primary activity, amongst the nation's neglected marginal groups.

Those who have been keeping up with the local news are aware of PSM activists showing support for a Perak single mother, whose home was allegedly auctioned off by a local bank, outside CIMB offices.

One would have also read about the arrest of PSM activists who were protesting against developers carrying out excavation works on farm lands cultivated by smallholders in Chepor Impian, Perak recently.

These are just two of the many causes PSM activists have taken up on behalf of marginalized people. PSM has campaigned against fuel hikes, housing, the abolishment of detention without trial, Orang Asli issues, minimum wages, gender equality, the environment, and human rights issues.

Activist centred party structure

PSM is structured differently from other political parties. The party is organized along parallel peoples' groups across society, either directly or through affiliated networks. These include government contract workers network (JPKK), plantation workers, marginalized urban groups, public flat dwellers, farmers groups, non-formal sector workers, lorry drivers, unionists, among others. PSM's influence spreads far beyond its formal membership, which is an untapped electoral resource.

This actually provides PSM with a wide base of support across the country, although it's not concentrated enough within the federal sphere to win single seats under the First-Past-the-Post system, where the winning candidate must win a majority of votes within a parliamentary seat, which has a defined geographic area.

According to deputy chairperson Arulchelvan, PSM is a small party with a growing membership, especially among the young. Electoral candidates are selected through the party hierarchy, where members have a direct say on who their local candidates are. This is in stark contrast to most other Malaysian political parties where candidates are selected by their respective central committees, or leader.

PSM's senior leadership has been involved in social activism for decades. Among the senior leaders are former Sungei Siput MP Dr Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj, who has championed workers issues for nearly 40 years. He defeated incumbent and senior cabinet minister, Samy Vellu in a surprise win back in 2008. Arulchelvan and current secretary general of PSM, Sivarajan Arumugan have been frontline social activists for over 30 years. Bawan KS was a student activist and is well known for the ["listen listen" confrontation with a BTN facilitator at UUM](#), that went viral on social media a few years ago.

Some of the other leaders like Choo Chon Hai, have been interned under ISA or the Emergency Ordinance (EO), over the party's lifetime. They are all held in high regard by the communities they have served over the years.

What does PSM stand for?

PSM is more an organization dedicated towards fighting for social justice than a political party. The party's policy platform is strongly orientated towards social justice and human rights issues. PSM can be considered more a peoples' rights focused party, than a socialist party in the strict sense.

Under the PSM perspective, Malaysia is seen as a class divided country, operating along the lines of a neo-feudal social structure, where the elite classes are given preferential treatment at the cost of the marginalised B40 and M40. PSM is a party that is orientated towards needs rather than other criteria, such as race.

PSM doesn't have any objectives to take Malaysia down any path towards classical socialism. Paradoxically, PSM wants to dismantle many socialist economic policies the present government has constructed to favour the privileged elite over the people.

Strongly embedded within the party platform are intentions to create a united and better society for Malaysians. These include

- Ensuring the B40 and M40 get a bigger share of the nation's wealth. This will be partly undertaken through creating a universal pension scheme and other social safety nets.
- To enshrine education a citizen's right.
- To develop job guarantee schemes.
- To guarantee minimum wage structures.
- To enhance public healthcare, and
- To make climate change a high priority.

The above basic policy pillars have long been the basis of the party's social activism, rather than political rhetoric. For example, PSM's commitment to climate change action sees logging as both unjust and contributing to global warming, where members have gone out to fight this through direct action, at personal cost.

The difference between PSM and other Malaysian political parties, is that PSM's platform has been developed from the grassroots, rather than central committees. The PSM platform is their base of action, and certainly not just empty rhetoric.

PSM's policy platform has been thought out down to the level of implementation. Local councils should be made responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of government low-cost housing with extra funding from the federal government. Local government elections should be reintroduced in stages, and more citizen committees formed to scrutinize local government spending. GLCs should be given a much larger mission to uplift local economies where communities directly benefit. Land around Orang Asli communities should be put under the control of these communities, so they can exercise much more self-determination over their lives. Targeted programs need to be put in place to create youth jobs in rural areas, while statutory bodies like the Electoral Commission and MACC should be given complete autonomy from executive government. PSM wants to bring much more public participate into government.

Much of PSM's policy platform has actually been 'borrowed' or 'hijacked' by other political parties, think tanks, and bureaucracy, without any credit given for their ideas.

If Malaysians knew more about what PSM actually stands for, most probably the party would be more appealing to many, with its people-centred approach. Due to poor self-promotion, PSM's message doesn't get the attention it deserves in the political arena.

Relationship with other parties

Although PSM is respected by all the major political parties, it has been treated very shabbily in the past. It took almost a decade for PSM to be finally registered as a political party back in 2008, because the government at the time claimed PSM was a national security threat.

Some claim PKR treated PSM very badly in the 2018 general election by running a candidate against the incumbent Dr Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj, leading to his defeat in Sungei Siput. According to deputy chairperson Arulchelvan, the current relationship with Pakatan Harapan is now far from cordial, where PSM is seen as an adversary, rather than a potential ally.

PSM was reluctant to join Pakatan Harapan in the 2018 election campaign, as the party didn't want to be associated with Mahathir Mohamed. The events of February 2020 proved PSM to be right with the collapse of the PH government after Mahathir's sudden resignation as prime minister.

Towards GE15

PSM knows it cannot stand alone. The party held a special congress earlier this year to give the leadership a mandate to discuss seat allocation with other selected political parties. The party's strength is focused within Perak and Selangor, where 27 shortlisted candidates have been selected through a bottom-up process, mentioned previously.

The organizational ambitions of those on the central committee are focused more towards activism than seeking public office. They feel a deep sense of duty towards assisting marginal communities. Those who join PSM do so more out of a sense of empathy and willingness to serve the people, than seeking personal political gain.

The way forward

The great challenge ahead is for PSM to enlarge their electoral support base. This in part can be done by educating the public about who they are and what they are doing within Malaysian society today. Once people across the nation see the work PSM is doing, PSM is sure to be seen in a much more favourable light, particularly if they are accepted as an equal party of a coalition.

The Party probably needs to relook at some of their semantics. This has been used by their enemies against them. A name change wouldn't alter the substance of PSM. Classical socialism is equated with Chinese communism, and modern socialism is full of woke ideology and totalitarianism. This is not what PSM is about.

PSM hasn't been able to reach out to Malays and Chinese. If PSM is going to pursue a political future, the party image must be updated and the constituency reached via skilful social media. Malay voters must be made aware there is another choice to PKR, while Chinese voters must be shown that there is a viable alternative to the DAP and MCA.

A diverse range of young professional must be recruited and groomed to become the party's future face out in the electorate. A growing youth membership is also assist in financially strengthening the party through innovative fundraising, and create a branch structure aligned with voting constituencies for better election organizing in the future.

PSM might be much more electorally successful at the local government level, if local elections were to be reintroduced at some time in the future. In the short-term PSM might also consider focusing on a couple of selected state seats Perak and Selangor, rather than focusing on federal seats. Local state issues and smaller constituencies may suit PSM better than contesting in much larger federal constituencies. Winning state constituencies is the first step to winning corresponding federal constituencies.

PSM must have the will to move into this Millennium through changing image and semantics to be more electorally appealing. If PSM does so, it could become a very strong grassroots-based party in the future. This may be a big trade-off for the current leadership, who are primarily social activists.

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