

'Malaysia needs a strong left front' — PSM leader

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Socialist Party of Malaysia (Parti Sosialis Malaysia, PSM) Deputy President S Arutchelvan (Arul) recently spoke with Green Left about the new hope for reviving left unity with the People's Party of Malaysia (Parti Rakyat Malaysia, PRM), following a recent change in its leadership.

There were previously two powerful left fronts in Malaysia's history, both repressed, Arul explained.

The grounds for this new hope is that Rohana Ariffin — who argued for the formation of a left front back in July 2015 when she spoke as a guest at a PSM congress — was recently appointed as PRM president after a period of stepping back from the party's leadership.

There is a dispute in the PRM about this leadership appointment and the Registrar of Societies has yet to rule on it.

"Rohana had helped draft a left coalition document but her party opposed joining the left coalition by a simple majority [in 2015]. Rohana then resigned as president as did the then-PRM secretary," Arul explained.

"The PRM is one of the oldest surviving parties in Malaysia. It was founded in 1955 [before independence from British colonial rule] by Ahmad Boestamam, one of the legendary figures in Malaysian left politics.

"Together with the Labour Party, the PRM formed the Socialist Front, which was the largest opposition in 1957 upon independence."

The Socialist Front won 16 state and eight federal seats in 1959 and became the third largest party in federal parliament. However in 1962, the British-backed conservative Alliance government used the draconian Internal Security Act to detain their leaders and effectively suppress it.

An earlier left front, the People's United Front-All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (PUTERA-AMCJA), Arul explained, had been suppressed by the British colonial administration. PUTERA-AMCJA was banned after it organised a successful general strike (*hartal*) in 1947 and the colonial authorities declared a state of emergency the following year.

"This was the biggest opposition our country had ever seen and the British had to declare a state of emergency to dismantle it."

Today, Malaysia needs another strong left coalition because politics is dominated by a dangerous racial and religious politics shared by the capitalist parties.

"Currently we have the so-called Unity government which is based on two coalitions, the Barisan

Nasional (National Front, BN) – which has ruled most of the time since independence – and the Pakatan Harapan [Alliance of Hope], which was previously the main opposition led by Anwar Ibrahim. So the former ruling parties and the former main opposition are now in a governing coalition.

“The main opposition is led by the Islamic Party (PAS), and mainstream politics is being polarised by a fear of a so-called “Green wave” of Islamicisation.

“Anwar’s camp is saying that the opposition front is corrupt and the opposition is saying that the Unity government is corrupt, pointing to the presence of BN in the government.”

Neither the government nor the opposition are interested in workers’ issues or in restoring elections for local government, which were banned in the 1960s to stop the left’s electoral advances at that level.

Other urgent issues are the need for better public healthcare, minimum wages and aged pensions. These three issues are being drowned out by constant talk of the “three Rs: race religion and royalty”, said Arul.

“We are facing very high inflation. Malaysia has to import a lot of goods and the exchange rate of the Ringgit has dropped. People are facing hardship all over the country.

“Wages have not gone up. This year the minimum wage is supposed to be reviewed but the government is trying to sidestep this by raising an alternative to the minimum wage called the ‘Progressive Wage Model’ which will not be compulsory for employers to implement.

“Recently, the government has increased the sales tax from 6% to 18% from March 1 and this is going to hit back in the cost of living.

“The government says it can’t afford to pay pensions anymore. So they are talking about employing part time and casual government workers [with no pension rights].

“Private sector workers are supposed to be covered by the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) but it is also in crisis,” said Arul.

“Only 40% of Malaysian workers get EPF and studies show that only 18% of workers aged 30 or below are covered by EPF, because most of them are informal and gig workers.

“A government study has shown that most private sector workers who retire will use up their EPF within five years.

“So the older workers cannot survive when they retire and the younger workers are low-paid and don’t have social security.”

Malaysia needs a new left front to break from the politics of fear, race and religion and advance a “people’s agenda”, Arul concluded.

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