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Understanding the Proliferation of Political Parties in Malaysia

By Farish A. Noor

Synopsis

Another political party has been launched in Malaysia – the Parti Pribumi Bersatu – and Malaysia’s political landscape has grown more crowded. Why is this happening and why do Malaysians keep forming new political parties? Political mobilisation remains attractive in the country, and parties offer more than ideological choices.

Commentary

MALAYSIA’S POLITICAL landscape has grown even more complex and diverse with the announcement of yet another political party – the Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu). It will be led by former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as president, with former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad as its founding chairman and Mahathir’s son, Mukhriz its vice-president. Earlier another new political party had entered the fray – the Parti Amanah Negara (National Trust Party) or Amanah – that was formed by former members of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS, and led by former PAS stalwarts like Mohamad Sabu, Mujahid Rawa, Ahmad Awang and Salahudin Ayub.

Both these parties are made up of dissidents who once belonged to the biggest Malay-Muslim parties of the country – UMNO and PAS – and they suggest that shifts are taking place within the largest electoral bloc of the country. These developments are happening at a time when the political fortunes of all the parties in the country are hanging in the balance.

Several Tentative Observations

The Merdeka Centre’s poll last year stated that levels of public support for

mainstream parties are dwindling, and the government's overall approval rating had dropped below 30 percent. The dominant UMNO's popularity has waned, but so has the standing of PAS since it left the opposition coalition. The new parties may tap into the grievances within those parties, but it is not clear if any of these new parties can dislodge the pivotal mainstream parties – UMNO and PAS - that have been part of the scene for decades. In terms of membership, UMNO and PAS remain the biggest parties in the country.

How can we account for these developments that seem to cancel out each other? If support for mainstream parties is indeed waning, how do we explain the results of the state elections in Sarawak, that witnessed a return to the fold of the UMNO-led ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition and the disastrous showing of the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP).

Firstly, it ought to be noted that Malaysia, by now, has become a thoroughly politicised country where the proliferation of parties can only suggest that a vast number of Malaysians of voting age have become members of a political party of their choice. This is not surprising when we locate Malaysia in the context of the Southeast Asian region, where political membership is widespread in many ASEAN countries, and in some instances are not properly regulated. (In the course of my own fieldwork covering previous elections in Indonesia, I encountered several instances of individuals who had become members of several parties at the same time, and this was not regarded as abnormal by any standards.)

Secondly, if it is the case that many Malaysians have become members of parties, it would also suggest that the Malaysian electorate has become saturated, and it would be relatively difficult for any new party to break new ground and capture new bases of support. This was the problem faced by the Anwar Ibrahim-led Keadilan party (PKR) in the past, when it found itself between two bigger and older opposition parties, PAS and the DAP.

For PKR's membership base to grow, it would need new members - but new members could only be found from the other parties – which would obviously be reluctant to allow other parties to 'poach' their own supporters.

What Future Does This Portend?

Thirdly, we need to ask how and why people join parties in the first place, and what they hope to gain from doing so. In the Malaysian context the answer partly lies in the workings of Malaysia's federal system, and the complex dynamics between the Federal government and state governments.

In the case of the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, the added appeal to political membership is the lure of local state politics, and the desire to assert the political identity of the states vis-à-vis the Federal government. This was made evident at the recent Sarawak elections as well, where local Sarawak interests and sentiments were paramount, and where the desire to preserve some sense of autonomy and identity was seen in the campaigning that took place.

Finally what does this say about how Malaysians view political parties in general,

and what does it portend for the future? The proliferation of parties – like the proliferation of NGOs, associations and lobby groups in Malaysia – has two sides to it: On the one hand it adds to an increasingly complex and at times confusing political landscape where identity politics and communal demands remain the norm and where political activism, when couched in communal terms, can appear divisive and exclusive.

But on the other hand the creation of more and more parties, NGOs and associations seems to suggest that the political system is still seen as a tool for mobilisation and a vehicle for some kind of political-social mobility. Parties in Malaysia often work as patronage-granting mechanisms that provide not only political goals but also social capital, credibility, prestige and means of acquiring power and resources.

Strengthening Democracy?

This has also been demonstrated in the workings of opposition parties that have assumed power in states like Penang, Kelantan and Selangor, since 1969. As such, parties are not only depositories of ideological belief, but also instruments for social-political-economic advancement, for individuals and communities alike.

Perhaps the one positive aspect of these recent developments is that it demonstrates that the mode of participatory democracy – even when it is populist in tone and tenor – still has appeal in the country, and that Malaysians still believe in playing by the rules of constitutional democracy.

A far more worrying outcome might be a situation where people lose faith in the political system, and regard both politics and the goal of state capture as futile and unnecessary; for that would suggest a deeper distrust of politics and the state altogether. As things stand, the immediate conclusion we can arrive at is that Malaysia's political arena remains an attractive space for those who wish to engage in politics. But the splintering of parties and the emergence of new parties will also contribute to the splitting of votes at any coming election, making it more difficult to predict the outcome of political contests at both the state and federal level.

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