

Electoral politics: A Double Edged Sword?

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The 2008 elections resulted in PSM having a Parliamentarian (Sg Siput), a State Assemblyman (Kota Damansara) and 3 Councillors appointed to Kajang, Petaling Jaya and Subang municipal councils. Though the PSM has been taking part in the general elections since 1999, this is the first time we have actually won positions. Having elected and appointed representatives in the party certainly has had a significant impact on the party – in both positive and negative ways.

A heightened profile for socialism

The PSM logo of the clenched left fist gained prominence by taking its place in parliament and the Selangor state assembly alongside all the other elected parties. The two elected representatives of the PSM, Dr Mohd Nasir Hashim and Dr Kumar Devaraj have succeeded in presenting a profile of the left that is not at all unappealing. Their concern for and emphasis on issues affecting the rakyat, their refreshing class-based analysis especially at a time when capitalism has stopped making sense, their accessibility and their simple lifestyle – these have contributed to a positive impression of socialism.

This, along with the material produced by the party for public consumption, such as articles, leaflets, and booklets analyzing and attacking policies that are hostile to the people, and presenting pro-people demands, have further enlightened people on socialist ideals. In addition, elected reps have access to many other forums – the ceramahs, the parliament and the state assembly, various committees where there are opportunities to analyse issues such as the FTA, low-cost housing and healthcare, not in race but in class terms, and the chance to show how meetings can be democratically run. Thus being elected has placed our members in a position to influence groups and people more easily.

The annual asset declaration by the PSM elected representatives, as well as the case against the government - the first by a parliamentarian - for the denial of constituency allocation to opposition members, have further added to the image of the PSM. Having elected members has raised the profile of the PSM and to some extent returned socialism to the Malaysian public consciousness and political arena after a lapse of 40 years.

Access to the community

Holding elected office has made it easier to gain access to the grassroots and hold meetings or discussions with members of the community to discuss their problems – and not only in the 2 constituencies where we won seats, but elsewhere as well. This has created opportunities to make contact with and understand the issues facing sectors that we did not have much contact with before – for example Malay settlers in land development schemes, and the Orang Asli. This has helped round out our understanding of Malaysian society and has given us the opening to educate and empower grassroots communities through their involvement in decision-making and action.

Building the capacity of the party

At the level of the two constituencies, many opportunities have opened up for the training and development of party members. The elected member constantly receives complaints and cases of all sorts from welfare problems to problems related to housing, eviction etc. These provide an excellent opportunity to train our members who can learn and gain experience through working on and helping to resolve the cases.

Apart from the greater exposure of the party to different and new sectors, the income of the elected members has enabled the PSM to engage 7 full-timers – most of whom are party activists who are prepared to work for wages far below what they could get in other jobs! This has greatly increased the capacity of the PSM, and has enabled this set of younger members to mature rapidly as community activists.

Seeds of an anti-capitalist movement?

Our usual modus operandi of using people's power to make the powers that be concede to people's demands is educational and empowering. Many ground battles are still fought especially in Sg Siput where there is active organization of farming communities, plantation workers and urban dwellers to safeguard their homes and livelihood and to fight for recognition, as both the State and Federal governments are in the hands of the neo-liberal BN government. However the attempts to build a Peoples' Representative Council to bring together all the different sectors facing problems hasn't progressed as rapidly as we had initially hoped it would.

In Selangor, the operating environment is quite different, for the State Government is under the Pakatan Rakyat – our political ally which has some social democratic tendencies. Here, as there is more access to the State Authorities, there is a greater reliance on negotiations with the State Authorities to resolve local issues. Also the provision of the RM 500,000 annual constituency fund for distribution within Kota Damansara constituency spawns a whole set of responsibilities and ties up the manpower of the PSM Branch there.

The Downside

Having elected and appointed PSM reps has a downside too.

A shift of power within the party

The PSM has always attempted to maintain an egalitarian structure – where all members are encouraged to participate in decision making and assume collective leadership. However to win elections you need to promote the candidate. A necessary evil, one might argue, but it undermines the principle of collective responsibility and egalitarianism within the party. Taking part in elections is dragging us into the unhealthy cult of leadership, resulting in the excessive promotion of the individual candidate and his virtues.

The heightened level of activity upon winning necessitates that the elected representative and his full timers, have to take certain decisions regarding local issues without consulting the other members of the branch. This means excluding the other party members who are volunteers who can only contribute after finishing work, from a major part of the process of analyzing and decision making. Development of members thus is not uniform, and power tends to shift to the elected representative.

The fact that the major source of funds is through the elected representative further accentuates the shift away from egalitarianism.

Gentrification

There are many perks that come with the office – generous stipends to stay in luxury hotels when parliament is in sitting, low interest loans to buy a new car, an AP to import a foreign car cheaply, invitations to go on official trips abroad, etc – and these perks might get even more if

our ally, the PR comes into power! Some of us might then be nominated into government boards or as directors of government owned companies (further “softening” our stance vis-à-vis the powers that be!) All these can have the effect of transforming the peoples’ representative into a satisfied member of the socio-economic elite. In this sense becoming an elected rep can be a profoundly corrupting experience! And only if we recognize it as that can we take the necessary precautions to prevent the perversion of our leaders!

Becoming overly dependent on holding the position

Another drawback is becoming overly dependent on all the allowances and perks (and constituency allocation as for Kota Damansara) that come with winning a seat. This can result in becoming overly dependent on full-timers and also not trying hard enough to raise funds ourselves. This can be detrimental to the party in the longer run – the branch may not be able to function if the seat is lost in future elections, if the development of a volunteer corps was neglected for the years the branch had access to funds from the government.

Compromising our principles?

Additionally, difficult issues arise when you are a part of a government in which you are a minority member. There is an obligation to stand by the government, though for the PSM, we have broken ranks when decisions are clearly not in people’s favour. We can come to look like apologists for the PR government. We become slow to organize protests, sometimes leaving it till too late. Compromises have often to be made with other parties in government whose stand may be unreasonable, and one has to tolerate the red tape.

Our actions in these circumstances are linked to the current reality in which the PR is the only political entity that is in a position to topple the BN, and our analysis is that those who are serious about change for Malaysia need to throw their weight behind the PR, and refrain from harming it. However if the PR comes into power, and is no longer the bullied underdog, the political equation would have changed and we may not need to be so muted in our criticisms.

Should we then have stayed out of electoral politics?

As can be seen there are several serious drawbacks as regards holding public position – and some of these threaten to undermine our socialist ideals and/or have the potential to cause splits within the party! But despite all these shortcomings, it appears that the PSM has no choice but to participate in electoral politics. The route to power in the common imagination is through

parliament. If we opt to stay out of the electoral process, we may become irrelevant or worse, we may be feared and ostracized for perhaps having ideas of seizing power by undemocratic means.

We have to participate, but with full recognition of the fact that the leaders we put up as our candidates are exposed to a variety of corrupting influences that might in the long run undermine their principles. There is plenty of opportunity for abuse of power and money when you become an elected rep. If you don't watch it, you can also get a bloated ego! Needless to say these opportunities will multiply manifold if the PR were to hold power at both the state and federal levels.

The sure way to resist all the temptations that come with position is to stay principled. On a personal level, this means sticking to a simple lifestyle and walking the socialist talk. Our PSM councilor for Kajang drives home this point when he moves around his municipality in his mode of transport – a motorcycle. It would help to be conscious of the fact that elected reps are mere catalysts, and that people are their boss. We should discourage people from overly praising and glorifying the elected leaders as well as the potential candidates for election. Can the promotion of candidate be confined to the election campaign period? The elected rep himself should humbly turn down practices like garlanding, which is an uphill task as it is such an entrenched and popular tradition. But we have to persevere! The use of the term “YB” should be discouraged so that a hierarchical differentiation isn't encouraged and the elected rep remains at the level of the rakyat? A simple but significant action would be to not display the official elected rep's plate on the car, as is already practiced by some.

The PSM's role should be to subvert the feudal mindset which is still quite prevalent in our society, and to become the forerunner of a new culture of politics that doesn't deify politicians. There should be a conscious effort on the part of the party to keep its elected representatives feet firmly on the ground! Otherwise, over time we run the risk of losing our leaders!

There is also a need for institutional safeguards within the PSM – a system of checks and balances that all candidates know of before they offer themselves as candidates. We need strict guidelines regarding funds received. A special committee at the level of the Central Committee including the elected representatives, should be set up to discuss and oversee sources of funding, and guidelines on the uses of these funds, directorship fees etc. A welfare fund at constituency level for all financial contributions and directors fees should also be set up so that this supplementary income is utilized in a transparent and accountable manner. The PSM ruling that the representative must contribute 40% – 50% of their monthly income to the party will also help enable the rep to keep things in perspective.

One of our Congresses passed a resolution that any elected representative of the PSM should only serve 2 terms in a row. He or she then should step aside for another member to take up the post. This might be an effective way of ensuring that our elected representative does not get too comfortable as a YB!

Participating in elections and winning is a double-edged sword, and we must learn from the experiences of left parties in other countries that have suffered splits because of differences over how to handle certain crucial issues related to electoral politics. We already have our share of such issues – should we increase our number of candidates for this coming elections?; should we acquiesce to the demand that we continue to stand under the PKR logo?; do we stand 3-corner if the PR parties also put up candidates in one or more of the 4 seats that we wish to stand in?; should we join the PR formally?; etc. And these are not easy issues, and consensus can be difficult to attain.

But so far we have managed to attain a consensus on these issues. We need to continue the process of debating within the party, and listening to the views of our activists, so that we will be able to manage the host of practical problems that our continued participation in elections is bound to bring.