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Malaysia's DAP: The Limits on Success

By Ariel Tan

SYNOPSIS

Malaysia's Democratic Action Party is grappling with the need to both deliver for its majority Chinese base and build its standing as a multiracial party with a national rather than communal agenda.

COMMENTARY

On 16 March, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) will vote in 30 members to its Central Executive Committee (CEC) who will, in turn, elect the party's national leadership. Secretary-General Anthony Loke has reportedly discouraged party elder Lim Guan Eng from seeking re-election as chairman amidst a rumoured campaign translated from the Chinese as "Deity Send-off", Lim's nickname being "Tokong" or deity.

This high-profile discord is more personal than ideological. But it has shed light on the party's changing role in nation-building from pugnacious opposition to leadership at the top table of the federal government.

Success Begets Problems

DAP looks set to complete its historic first full term in the federal government under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Its majority Chinese base voted overwhelmingly (estimated at over 90 per cent) for DAP and its coalition, Pakatan Harapan, in the 2022 General Election (GE2022) and has remained supportive, particularly given the steady economic recovery.

DAP holds 40 of Harapan's 81 seats in the 222-seat parliament and is the second largest party after the opposition Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), which holds 43 seats. Its support is critical for Anwar, whose Parti Keadilan Rakyat has 31 seats. Harapan's

plurality allowed it to attract other coalitions, including Barisan Nasional (30 seats) led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS, 23) and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS, 6), to form the government.

Unsurprisingly, success has brought troubles. With power and access to spoils, infighting and corruption allegations have grown. Incumbency has also necessitated compromises distasteful for their base. These echo issues that plagued its erstwhile rivals, Gerakan and the Malaysian Chinese Association, which DAP, in opposition, had ruthlessly exploited.

DAP now has in its grasp the political and socioeconomic destiny of the Chinese community and its long-held dream of a multicultural, just, and social democratic “Malaysian Malaysia”. Pulled from different directions, it risks falling between two stools.

The Lim Legacy

Lim Kit Siang and his son, Lim Guan Eng, are credited for DAP’s success, although their firm grip over the party had detractors. Guan Eng exuded brash energy and facilitated Penang’s progress as its Chief Minister, although he has faced corruption charges from that tenure. His stint as Finance Minister (2018-2020) brought pride to the community but was also used by opponents to paint him and the party as disrespectful of Bumiputera privileges. It also alienated the Malay-dominated civil service.

Lim’s recent vociferous public criticism of his successor in Penang, Chow Kon Yeow, and rumoured efforts to advance his sister and son in politics have offended sensibilities against dynastic succession, and galvanised opposition against him. While his supporters argue that he is simply passionate about Penang’s progress, others see it as an ugly attempt to reclaim power.

In his campaign for re-election as party chairman, Lim emphasised that only party members should decide his future – a response to UMNO president Zahid Hamidi’s suggestion that his time had passed. More pointedly, he [stated](#), “DAP was never bossed around by UMNO when we were in opposition and will not be bossed around when we are in government”. This could be taken to allude to concerns that DAP has stopped opposing UMNO’s excesses, and that the Anwar administration has elevated UMNO while giving DAP short shrift.

Lim’s supporters are unhappy that graft charges against him persist, while those against Zahid Hamidi and former Prime Minister Najib Razak have been dropped. They also believe that DAP deserves more cabinet positions given its 40-seat contribution. To them, the Anwar government’s assiduous cultivation of the Malay-Muslim vote seems to come at the expense of DAP’s base.

Lim will receive some support even if he does not win the chairmanship. Reminiscent of DAP’s approach while in opposition, he has called for a balanced approach to budget allocations, proposing that non-Bumiputera receive RM1 for every RM10 allocated to Bumiputera, instead of the 3 per cent in the 2022 budget in the interest of national unity. Such advocacy may showcase his commitment to Chinese and non-

Bumiputera interests but likely put the DAP government officeholders in an awkward position.

Accepting Reality – A New DAP?

Secretary-General Anthony Loke was the consensus choice of his generation for party chief and has consolidated his position. The Transport Minister reportedly has the support of DAP Vice Chairman Nga Kor Ming, who has a strong base in Perak, and the younger DAP National Organising Secretary Steven Sim, who had benefitted from Loke's support to make Penang party chief. Nga was appointed Housing and Local Government Minister, and Sim was promoted to Human Resources Minister. Both may take turns as party chief after Loke. The DAP attracts sufficient talents to ensure sustainable leadership succession.

Loke was seen as the right man for the hour of compromise when Anwar seized the opportunity to form a "unity government" after GE2022. Acknowledging the bad blood between DAP, and UMNO and GPS, whose support was critical for Anwar, he went so far as to say that DAP unconditionally supported Anwar without demands for specific government positions and flew to Sarawak to apologise to GPS for DAP's past criticisms of its leadership. The 2023 DAP party congress – attended by the UMNO President for the first time – reiterated DAP's commitment to Malay special rights, the position of Islam and Bahasa Melayu, as well as the rights and interests of other races and communities, as enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

DAP members accept Loke's conciliatory approach partly because of the trauma of the "Sheraton Move" in 2020, where Malay-majority parties came together to depose the first Harapan government – seen as an assertion of "*ketuanan Melayu*" (Malay sovereignty) – on claims that they could not allow DAP to dominate the political system to the detriment of Malay-Muslims. The incident demoralised DAP and the Chinese as it seemed they would never be allowed to play a significant role in the country's governance.

Therefore, Harapan's return to government in 2022, through Anwar and extreme political horse-trading, was a huge relief, encouraging forbearance, even fatalism, among DAP's supporters.

However, preserving the coalition has required DAP to stand with corruption-tainted parties like UMNO and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah. Its officeholders have also avoided knee-jerk public reactions to frequent provocations over race and religion issues, instead working behind the scenes to unpick the knots.

Spotty Performance

DAP's performance has been mixed. It has yet to secure government recognition of the United Examination Certificate for Independent Chinese schools, corruption cases against political affiliates have been controversially dropped, and race relations have worsened.

Proposals, such as for urban renewal and local elections, are politicised and cast as threats to Malay interests by the opposition and right-wing groups like ISMA (Ikatan

Muslimin Malaysia or Malaysian Muslim Solidarity). Proposals like a national harmony bill and a non-Muslim religious affairs minister, which would have helped to air the concerns of minority groups have also been shelved.

However, proposed requirements for halal certification for self-designated “Muslim-friendly” restaurants were rolled back, possibly due to public outcry by DAP leaders and their quiet lobbying.

While DAP has pushed for higher wages and worker welfare, some leaders are accused of being too close to big business, especially in infrastructural development.

Its multicultural branding has also suffered from the lack of prominent Indian leaders since Karpal Singh’s passing and former Penang Deputy Chief Minister II P Ramasamy’s resignation. The recruitment of Malay leaders and supporters appears to have plateaued.

A key concern is voter apathy and turnout – DAP has thus warned against a potential Islamist right-wing government to mobilise its base. Still, it avoids direct clashes with UMNO and Malay-Muslim opposition parties, perhaps foreseeing a future where it may need to form a coalition with PAS and Bersatu.

Conclusion

With firm support from the Chinese (about 28 per cent of the electorate) and strong representation in prosperous urban centres and states like Penang, Selangor, Johor, and Perak, DAP would be a key player for any federal government. However, with declining birthrates and emigration among its base, its political clout could decline. Its struggles with infighting, alleged corruption, and beginners’ missteps in government have been humbling, but may have also helped DAP be more relatable and accepted by other parties.

DAP is not, in fact, a serious electoral threat to Malay-Muslim parties which primarily compete among themselves in Malay-majority areas. However, the opposition has used DAP’s electoral strength to suggest that Harapan-led administrations, including Anwar’s, are dominated and controlled by DAP. Presumably, DAP would be less of a concern where it is not the largest party in the coalition.

Working within a Malay-dominant system, DAP leaders are seeking to translate political success into tangible benefits for their supporters, particularly in fiscal, economic, and infrastructural governance. Its main work, however, may be to normalise its place in any federal government.

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