

Malaysian election: PSM promotes illusions in Anwar's opposition coalition

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The Malaysian national election due to be held on May 5 is shaping up as a watershed in the country's politics. Amid widespread popular dissatisfaction and hostility, the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-led coalition, known as Barisan Nasional (BN), could suffer significant losses or even lose power for the first time in more than half a century.

With a potential political crisis looming, the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) is playing a key role for the country's ruling elites by shackling workers, especially young people, to the opposition People's Alliance (PR), led by Anwar Ibrahim, and to the framework of parliament.

The PSM was formed in 1998 by a group which broke from the former Malaysian People's Socialist Party after it dropped the name "socialist" and subsequently dissolved itself into Keadilan—Anwar's party. The PSM has nothing to do with Marxism or socialism: it is thoroughly nationalist in outlook, advocates protectionist measures and promotes the illusion that the lot of working people can be improved through limited, piecemeal reforms via parliament.

For the first decade of its existence, the PSM was denied registration as a political party, ostensibly on the grounds that it posed a security threat. For more than 50 years, UMNO has presided over an anti-communist police state that regarded the advocacy of socialism as tantamount to treason and routinely jailed its political opponents without trial under the country's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA).

In the wake of the 2008 election, the PSM was officially recognised as a political party. The abrupt about-face was bound up with a recognition in ruling circles of the need for a "left" safety valve for mounting anti-government opposition. Anwar's PR received an estimated 46 percent of the vote, but due to

a substantial gerrymander won only 82 seats in the 222-seat national parliament. It also won office in five of Malaysia's 13 states. The result was a major shock to UMNO, which removed Abdullah Badawi and installed Najib Razak as prime minister.

The PSM ran in the 2008 election under the banner of Anwar's Keadilan party, promoting the fraud that this openly bourgeois party represented a genuine alternative for the working class. For its political services, the PSM received two seats: Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj won the party's first ever federal seat and PSM president Nasir Hashim won a seat in the Selangor state legislative assembly.

The PSM's manifesto for this year's election makes clear its political subservience to the opposition alliance. It declares that the PSM sees PR "as partner or comrade in defeating the public enemy [UMNO]" and promises to work "together with all opposition parties, NGOs and other community groups in battling against the UMNO-BN regime."

The manifesto appeals to Anwar for an electoral alliance, pledging that if its candidates win a seat at any level of government they will support PR and PR-friendly parties. Its claim that the PSM will maintain its own "independent position" is belied by their uncritical attitude to Anwar and his coalition. Moreover, even if the PR rejects an electoral alliance, the PSM "will continue to support all PR candidates except in constituencies where the PSM is standing."

To date it appears that Anwar has snubbed the PSM's overture for an election alliance. Moreover, an article has appeared on the PR-connected Malaysiakini web site accusing the PSM of forcing "three cornered fights"—that is, undermining Anwar's ability to win government. PSM secretary general S. Arutchelvan issued a very defensive reply last weekend, declaring

that he was offended by the “unfair, biased and manipulative” article and denying that his party was challenging the PR in any seat. He appealed to the PR to recognise that “the big picture is to defeat BN and we all have a big task towards this.”

The PSM may be a relatively small party at present, but it is being groomed to play a key role in the event that the election gives rise to political instability. The Malaysian corporate elite is frustrated that the UMNO-led government has not gone far enough, nor fast enough, in restructuring the economy to meet the requirements of foreign and domestic investors. UMNO, which represents the conservative ethnic Malay elite, has based its rule on the so-called New Economic Policy (NEP) that discriminates against the ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian minorities in jobs, businesses and education. The NEP, along with other forms of national economic regulation, is now regarded in business circles as a barrier to the further integration of Malaysia into globalised production and finance.

Under conditions of a worsening global economic breakdown, the demands for pro-market reform and restructuring have become more insistent. While gross domestic product is still growing at more than 5 percent, there is considerable concern about the future as competition for foreign investment intensifies and exports are hit by the economic downturn in China and slump in the US, Europe and Japan.

Sections of the ruling class are backing Anwar as the most capable figure to carry out the required economic agenda. He was deputy prime minister and finance minister in the UMNO-led government of Mahathir Mohamad. In the midst of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Anwar advocated the implementation of the IMF’s agenda of opening up the Malaysian economy, which was bitterly opposed by Mahathir as it would have badly affected UMNO’s business cronies.

Mahathir sacked Anwar and drove him and his supporters out of UMNO. Anwar was detained without charge under the ISA after he began staging large anti-government rallies. He was physically beaten by the country’s police chief then finally tried on trumped up charges of sodomy and corruption. The very fact that the sodomy charge was overturned in 2004, enabling him to stand and win a parliamentary seat in a 2008 by-election, was an indication of shifting support in ruling circles behind the opposition.

However, as the ruling class is well aware, a change of government in the upcoming election brings considerable political dangers. While Anwar is promising economic handouts, democratic rights and a bright future for all, big business is already warning that public debt levels are too high and must be wound back. If the PR does win and Anwar implements the austerity agenda being demanded by finance capital around the world, the hopes and expectations of those who voted for the opposition will be rapidly dashed, leading to political and social unrest. A political crisis could emerge even more quickly if UMNO retains power and implements the same measures.

In either case, the PSM will be called on to play a similar political role to SYRIZA in the upheavals in Greece and the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) in the Egyptian revolution, subordinating the working class to the framework of bourgeois parliamentary politics and blocking the development of a genuine revolutionary socialist movement of workers and youth.



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