



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

PARTY OF HARDSHIP

The Evolution of Malaysia's
Parti Keadilan Rakyat

James Chai

ISEAS
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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Party of Hardship: The Evolution of Malaysia's Parti Keadilan Rakyat

By James Chai

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The People's Justice Party (PKR) may in many ways be synonymous with its larger-than-life leader, Anwar Ibrahim, who, although only president for six of the party's twenty-five years, has always been its de facto leader and adviser. However, PKR is much more than only about Anwar, and this paper traces the evolution of the party independently of Anwar as a person.
- PKR's evolution can be broken down into four main periods: 1998–2004 (formative), 2005–13 (golden era), 2014–18 (all-in for power), and 2019–22 (lessons on restraints). From 1998 to 2022, PKR tended to adopt a big-tent approach (internally and externally), ideological synthesis to find a middle ground, and a loose organization led by a charismatic personality at the top and self-organization at the grassroots.
- PKR was born out of a major crisis when Anwar, then deputy prime minister, was sacked in 1998 and subsequently jailed twice in the following two decades. For the most part, the party operated with its figurehead in jail, thus learning how to rely on coalition strengths, working with civil society, mass movements, and political parties to survive and win power.
- The party's loose organization became beneficial when it partnered with parties that are ideological opposites such as DAP and PAS (as part of Pakatan Rakyat in 2008), and expanded party enfranchisement via a one-person-one-vote system. This also allowed PKR to adopt a middle-ground approach in policies such as *hudud* and the New Economic Policy (NEP).

- However, openness and loose organization led to factionalism within the party, resulting in large-scale defections during the 2009 Perak crisis, the 2014 Selangor menteri besar crisis, and the 2020 Sheraton Move. Without pushing its big-tent approach to the limit and without working with arch-enemy Mahathir Mohamad, PKR would not have emerged victorious in the first-ever change in government in 2018 and Anwar Ibrahim would not have been pardoned and freed. Notwithstanding that, it also led to a fractious coalition and a loss of trust in the leadership during Pakatan Harapan's term in government (2018–20).
- The post-election Unity Government with Anwar Ibrahim as the tenth prime minister marks PKR's first "real" governing experience, and this would not have been possible without PKR's core identity operating in full gear.

Party of Hardship: The Evolution of Malaysia's Parti Keadilan Rakyat

By James Chai¹

INTRODUCTION

This is the party of hardship (*Parti Derita*). This party was lifted by the have-nots, from the streets. The rich tycoons, the wealthy elites, [they] are not with us. The people with us are people like you. With the spirit and dreams for justice. We are not the smartest or the ones with the most resources, what we have are spirit and dreams. So rise up!

—PKR president Anwar Ibrahim, 2019 PKR congress²

The People's Justice Party (PKR) in Malaysia was born out of crises. Unlike other parties that had the luxury of deciding on its ideology and strategy methodically, PKR needed to grapple with survival while its figurehead, Anwar Ibrahim, was jailed and its members regularly arrested and detained. Its opponents once said that “peace is a liability to PKR”³ and its members would not disagree with that.

Its success was never predestined, and no one could have guessed that the quarter-of-a-century struggle to make Anwar prime minister would one day come true. This was achieved in November 2022.

PKR's earliest supporters recount the days of arrests and job losses, and fleeing the country in the face of persecution for being associated

¹ James Chai is Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore and a columnist at *Malaysiakini* and *Sin Chew Daily*.

² <https://www.facebook.com/keadilanjeram/videos/parti-ini-parti-kitaparti-ini-parti-derita-parti-ini-diangkat-oleh-rakyat-yang-s/305272240640935/>

³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/185675>

with Anwar. As a party, PKR was often labelled the “weak link”⁴ in coalitions and its leader too accommodative, resulting in defections and indiscipline. Within the party, the financial rewards were thin, as party members often volunteered and self-organized, without monetary returns. Perhaps most brutal of all, Anwar had to endure politically motivated charges and be jailed twice, both times upending the party.

This is the party that fought on the streets, confronted authorities for the freedom of Anwar, and owned the narrative to change the government. It is never the party of the elite or the wealthy. It is a party of many hardships—it is “Parti Derita”.

This paper argues that PKR’s core identity revolves around three characteristics. First, its big-tent approach in the pursuit of power. Since the beginning, PKR has pursued the politics of coalitions and became a critical intermediary in elevating opposition politics into a formidable force. Internally, the party also practises a big-tent approach for accessible and inclusive participation, in its multiracial composition and its direct election methods. Its focus on power also meant that it assumed the role of the narrative owner in every election, driving the key message around which opposition parties congregate.

Second, PKR’s ideology of synthesis. In its policy orientation, PKR rarely subscribes to a set belief on an ideological spectrum, and instead, synthesizes often opposing belief systems. This takes from Anwar Ibrahim and his preference to combine Islam and democracy, economic growth and constraint, capitalism and socialism, freedom and order. Within the party, discussions of ideology may not be prominent, but it subscribes to a hidden criterion of sacrifice, where old-timers pride themselves for placing the party above their self-interest.

Third, the party’s personality-led loose organization from top to bottom. At the top, Anwar Ibrahim’s unwaning charisma persistently defined the party for outsiders, with senior party leaders taking from Anwar’s heritage of speech and narrative-crafting. At the bottom, the

⁴ <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/06/04/pkr-the-weakest-link-we-won-most-seats-says-anwar/>

party runs loosely without strict hierarchy and structure, and its members self-organize on a voluntary basis, with little money and bounded only by old-school brotherhood and trust.

This paper will use four time periods to validate the developments of these characteristics (see Annex A for PKR's significant milestones since 1998):

- 1998–2004: *Formative genes*—Crisis beginnings, merger, and the lowest point
- 2005–13: *Golden era*—Anwar's release, Pakatan Rakyat, and PKR's ascendancy
- 2014–18: *All-in for power*—Anwar imprisoned again, and the impossible victory
- 2019–22: *Lessons on restraints*—Finally, Anwar as prime minister

As part of the endeavour to enrich the scant literature about PKR, this paper benefited enormously from interviews with former and present party leaders and members, besides selected twenty-four-year archival secondary data from 1999 to 2022.⁵ The purpose of this paper is to determine what makes PKR beyond the caricature of chaos and defection, electoral rise and fall, and the tragic and triumphant story of Anwar Ibrahim.

Due to space constraints, this paper will inevitably be selective with events that affected the party rather than adopt a comprehensive approach for archival purposes. It will also place more emphasis on the most formative periods of PKR, i.e., 1998–2004 and 2005–13. It will only take into account the wider political context insofar as it affects PKR in a substantial way.

⁵ *MalaysiaKini* was the primary source of archival material, given its extensive and digital coverage of news related to the opposition since 1999. The news portal was founded by Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran and publishes in four languages: Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil.

1998–2004: *FORMATIVE GENES*—CRISIS BEGINNINGS, MERGER, AND THE LOWEST POINT

On 2 September 1998, the deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, was sacked by the prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad. The next day, the former was stripped of his political positions including as deputy president of the largest party in Malaysia, UMNO. The groups that immediately followed Anwar after his sacking were mostly those he had founded and led: ABIM,⁶ PKPIM,⁷ JIM,⁸ and ASASI. A few loyalists from UMNO also followed but many fled when the arrests and persecutions started.⁹ On 20 September 1998, the largest protest gathering in Malaysian history was held at Dataran Merdeka and the National Mosque.

The succeeding events are familiar to Malaysians as they came to define the era: balaclava-clad police commandos crashing into Anwar's house to arrest him, Anwar bruised and battered with a black eye while detained, and Anwar eventually jailed for corruption and sodomy in 1999–2000.

What started as a protest in the form of the *Reformasi* movement under GERAK and then under ADIL, against Anwar's arrest, detention and jailing morphed into a political party, and Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN) was formed.¹⁰ Its earliest organizing document was the Permatang

⁶ The Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement, founded in 1971 by Ustaz Wahab Sulaiman; Anwar was one of its co-founders.

⁷ National Islamic Students Association, founded in 1961. Anwar, one of the co-founders, was its president between 1968 and 1971.

⁸ Jamaah Islah Malaysia (JIM). Before it changed its name to IKRAM.

⁹ Khoo Boo Teik called this the “killing the chicken to frighten the monkey” tactic; Mahathir Mohamad struck against Anwar so violently that no one dared to dissent after that, except for a small group. The precedent was UMNO's treatment of former Selangor menteri besar, Harun Idris; his influential youth base almost disappeared after he was imprisoned.

¹⁰ Anwar Ibrahim was given five name choices, including Parti Keadilan, Parti Keadilan Negara, and Parti Keadilan Kebangsaan. He was also given choices of

Pauh Declaration by Anwar, and leaders from different groups formally organized themselves, knowing that political power was needed to release Anwar and to carry out reforms.

With an absent figurehead, the “mosquito party”¹¹ was at risk of failing, with many predicting that Anwar and his followers would concede and return to UMNO’s fold just as Tengku Razaleigh did following the failure of his Semangat 46 experiment.

Three events helped arrest PKN’s decline, however: the 1999 general election (GE10), the 2000 Lunas by-election, and the merger with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM).

In GE10 (Table 1), although PKN was only able to garner 5 parliamentary seats, the 20 additional seats and one state (Terengganu) that PAS gained, primarily among Malay voters, were attributed to the

Table 1: Total Parliamentary Seats Contested and Won by PKR Since 1999

Election Year	Total Seats	Total Seats Contested by PKR	Total Seats Won by PKR
1999 (GE10)	193	78	5
2004 (GE11)	219	80	1
2008 (GE12)	222	84	31
2013 (GE13)	222	99	30
2018 (GE14)	222	71	48
2022 (GE15)	222	100	31

the logo which included the sun. In the end, Anwar Ibrahim chose Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN), and with the eye logo. Source: <https://ms-my.facebook.com/drwawi/photos/tanggal-4-april-mencatat-sejarah-perjuangan-yang-berliku18-tahun-keadilan-memuga/931058633664080/>

¹¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/82504>

Reformasi movement. The loose coalition of Barisan Alternatif (PKN, PAS, DAP and PRM), formed purely for electoral convenience, was “encouraging” in showing people what “cooperation could look like”.¹²

A year later, the Lunas by-election gave an additional boost to PKN. The seat was held by the late Malaysia Indian Congress assemblyman, Joe Fernandez, who had won with a 4,700-vote majority against a DAP candidate. PKN negotiated for its candidate, Saifuddin Nasution, to be given the seat to capitalize on the Malay swing seen in GE10. In the end, Saifuddin turned over the seat with a slight majority of 530 votes. Lunas was a turning point for PKN; it showed that it is not just a protest party but one that could have electoral success.¹³ More importantly, it carved out a niche in mixed seats—at that time still within BN’s remit—that DAP and PAS had not been able to win. This gave some staying power to PKN.

Beyond its electoral validation, however, was its internal reorganization boosted by its merger with PRM. Anwar Ibrahim wrote to PRM president Syed Husin Ali (SHA) before GE10 to consider either cooperation, coalition or merger.¹⁴ PKN and PRM consisted of like-minded individuals who shared the same idealism and experience in organizing protests and running party newspapers.¹⁵ PRM, founded in 1955 by Ahmad Boestamam, though electorally unimportant, was rich in history and followed the progressive heritage of early Malay nationalist movements.¹⁶ Anwar knew that for his party to take the multiracial and not

¹² Interview with former PKR leader (February 2024); Many within PKN felt that the Malay wave was strong and that it would have converted 5–10 additional seats for PKN had they used their banners and obtained more seats in Malay-leaning mixed seats.

¹³ Interview with former PKR leader (February 2024).

¹⁴ *Syed Husin Ali: Memoirs of a Political Struggle (Memoir Perjuangan Politik Syed Husin Ali)* (Selangor: SIRD, 2012).

¹⁵ Suara Keadilan and Suara Parti Rakyat.

¹⁶ Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, *Malaysian Son: A Progressive’s Political Journey in the Heart of Southeast Asia* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2022).

the Islamic route, a merger with PRM would provide it with “zeitgeist”¹⁷ and a sense of belonging, besides strengthening its grassroots support.¹⁸

The merger came with ample difficulties; Islamic activists in PKN were suspicious of PRM’s socialist inclinations while PRM worried about the merger diluting its progressive credentials. Anwar wrote letters from prison to not only convince PKN and PRM members of the necessity for merger—for “progressive energy to be under one movement, with principles of democracy, justice, and people-first”¹⁹—but also to hasten the political process after years of delay.²⁰

After two years of painful negotiations, on 3 August 2003, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) came into being as a result of a merger between PKN and PRM. It had a sixty-two-member transitional supreme council that was headed by Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (PKN), the wife of Anwar Ibrahim, and SHA (PRM). The jailed Anwar was made PKR’s adviser and life member, and was still regarded as the “opinion maker” of the party.²¹ This allowed for Anwar’s views to be brought to the party and debated openly.

The nature of the merger planted the early seeds of PKR’s characteristics, and these remain obvious to this day.

Firstly, it saddled PKR with a big-tent strategy, pursued both internally and externally. A multiracial party, though not the first of its kind, was still rare; these had not been electorally successful. Deciding to open party membership to everyone from the start proved timely.²² Almost

¹⁷ Anwar’s letter to Hassan Karim. *Syed Husin Ali: Memoirs of a Political Struggle*.

¹⁸ Interview with an *Otaf Reformasi*, 16 November 2023.

¹⁹ *Syed Husin Ali: Memoirs of a Political Struggle*.

²⁰ Anwar wrote that “I cannot help but feel disappointed at the pace of negotiations ... it would be tragic if this fell through because of the few dissent from activists [who do not see the value of merger]!”, *Syed Husin Ali: Memoirs of a Political Struggle*.

²¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/14547>

²² NGOs that were supportive of *Reformasi* included Suaram, JUST, and Tenaganita.

every leader who came into PKR brought along a collection of NGO activists, reminiscent of Anwar’s earliest networking,²³ such as Jingga 13, Solidariti Anak Muda Malaysia, Movement for Change Sarawak, and Sahabat Alam Malaysia. This accelerated PKR’s mobilization strength, no doubt, but it also became its source of weakness due to ease of defections.

Externally, the *Reformasi* movement brought together disparate political interests to challenge the Barisan Nasional (BN). Opposition alliances had been rare, but there was clearly an upward trend after 1999 (Annex B). The party had cobbled together BA as an electoral cooperation, and had since then never gone into any election without a coalition. This strengthened its parliamentary chances and also created a platform that could involve all segments of society.²⁴ The belief in coalitions went deeper with each election, from electoral pacts and cooperation into coalitions with a common platform, manifesto and organization structure in the latest version of Pakatan Harapan (PH).

The main value that PKR provided to opposition politics at that time was a template for dissent. Its biggest value was its political education on the institutions’ ills and the country’s crisis when information was scarce. Its action was a protest and confrontation against the authorities. Internally, this formed the legitimacy claim of its members, getting them to consider “sacrifice” as the ultimate legitimacy.²⁵ As members lost jobs and employment opportunities for years for having participated in demonstrations and party activities,²⁶ it became a badge of honour and a sign of how deep their wish for reforms was.

²³ Interview with PKR division leader (15 November 2023).

²⁴ Interview with former PKR leader (February 2024).

²⁵ Members would often ask “Where were you then [when *Reformasi* happened]?” to gauge the depth of your sacrifice. Interview with an *Otaí Reformasi*, 16 November 2023.

²⁶ “Only Chinese employers were willing to hire party members at that time”. Interview with long-time party insider (January 2024); *Syed Husin Ali: Memoirs of a Political Struggle*.

Secondly, the merger also accentuated the loose organization style that had come to define PKR. Compared to PAS which is more structured, based on its religious communities and activities, PKR's organization has been defined as "unsettled dynamism and ongoing tensions",²⁷ analogized as an "unfinished *kenduri*".²⁸ PKR member of parliament Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad wrote about how the party's organizations were bare-boned and did not operate from a service centre or office in the early days.²⁹ Instead, meetings were held at various Indian-Muslim eateries, with agenda and minutes notes often stained with curry and tea.

This was partly due to its figurehead, Anwar, being in prison. PKR struggled to stabilize its organization; some preferred to defer to Anwar's wishes (via hard-to-discern handwritten letters and notes from prison) while others did not want Anwar to "run the party from prison".³⁰ The party was run by the non-political wife of Anwar, directed by a "motley collection of untested figures, crippled by the detention of several stalwart leaders".

From the start, the party had comparatively few resources to participate in an asymmetrical contest,³¹ burdened with a special necessity to tolerate differences, either ethnic, political or ideological. Early PKR leaders described their discussions to be about "consensus and quarrel".³² For instance, although many in the party did not agree with the use of confrontational demonstration, the leaders still allowed room for these people to do so as long as they did not compel others who disagreed with them to join in. Some interpret this as a lack of unity in the party, but many PKR members saw it as flexibility.

²⁷ Interview with an *Otaí Reformasi*, 16 November 2023.

²⁸ Malay banquet or feast.

²⁹ Nik Nazmi, *Malaysian Son*.

³⁰ Nik Nazmi, *Malaysian Son*; Khoo Boo Teik, *Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power* (Selangor: SIRD, 2023).

³¹ Khoo, *Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power*.

³² Interview with former PKR leader (February 2024).

Insiders note that Anwar’s style of being accommodative and “not a perfectionist” came from his student activist days, where he was able to mediate and merge differing views.³³ He had an ad hoc, impromptu organizational style and was patient in taking in dissent.³⁴ At the same time, Anwar believed in his charisma and innate ability to charm different audiences towards a common goal. Although Wan Azizah worked hard in taking care of members’ welfare and updating herself with political developments—being the “rock” of PKR while Anwar was in prison—she was not an iron woman who could put the messy house in order.³⁵

Thirdly, the merger provided a policy lexicon for a cause beyond freeing Anwar.³⁶ Before the merger, the only substantive ideology document laid down was by Anwar Ibrahim; this was the Permatang Pauh Declaration made ten days after his sacking in 1998. Prefaced with a Quranic injunction and inspiration from Asian traditions for individual renewal, he stated in abstract terms an anti-oligarchic stance where the “caring civil society” must assist the poor and disadvantaged, and how it was incumbent to fight against the “opulent and greedy clique”.³⁷ At that time, Anwar was too much “[u]nder great stress [and was too] short of time” to lay out a full document before going to prison.³⁸ His followers relied on free-flow, unstructured discourse at *warung* (roadside stalls) and *mamak*,³⁹ to give meaning to Reformasi as a “critique of the present system along rational, progressive, objective, and scientific terms”.⁴⁰

³³ Interview with an *Otai Reformasi*, 16 November 2023.

³⁴ Party insiders talked about how the party congress was often ad-hoc with the agenda, which would be made known only a few days before the congress.

³⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/101932>

³⁶ During times when Anwar was not in prison, the Anwar-centric cause stretched to making Anwar the prime minister of Malaysia.

³⁷ <http://telawi.my/2011/07/ingatlah-kembali-deklarasi-permatang-pauh/>

³⁸ Khoo, *Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power*.

³⁹ Rather than 4–5 seats at a table, the discussions typically involved 4–5 tables like a Malay banquet event.

⁴⁰ Farish A. Noor, “Looking for *Reformasi*: The Discursive Dynamics of the Reformasi Movement and Its Prospects as a Political Project”. *Indonesia and the Malay World* 27, no. 77 (2007): 5–8.

Since mainstream media did not publicize all sides of the story, many early PKR supporters felt that places like Bangsar Utama (Malay-Islamist discourse), Jalan Telawi (Khalid Jaafar-led book club), and Petaling Jaya (intellectuals like SHA) were places to debate and seek truths.⁴¹ To many, Anwar was not just a sacked deputy, but a lens for the people's understanding of Malaysia's state of affairs.

This accommodating background of PKN enabled different ideologies, visions and experiences to join in.⁴² After negotiations, seventeen policy items, which read more like a manifesto, were included under Article 5 of the PKR constitution, including rights and protection of the indigenous community, workers, women and East Malaysia.⁴³ This was the start of displaying Anwar's ability to not only bring different segments under one party, but also to synthesize differing ideological positions under a common aim.⁴⁴ In the end, PKR's ideology is rooted in pragmatism and is broadly left-wing, going beyond the issue of Anwar's imprisonment and UMNO's cruelty (*kezaliman*).

Towards the end of this period, however, PKR was dealt an electoral blow that was nearly debilitating. Mahathir set in motion a series of events that reversed UMNO's fortune to PKR's detriment. He abruptly resigned as prime minister in October 2003 after a twenty-two-year

⁴¹ Petaling Jaya had a community of journalists and politicians, including Samad Ismail, Syed Zahari, and Usman Awang. Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/68761>; Interview with an *Otai Reformasi*, 16 November 2023.

⁴² Interview with former PKR leader (February 2024).

⁴³ James Chai, "A Deep Dive into the People's Justice Party", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2024/21, 20 March 2024, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2024-21-a-deep-dive-into-malysias-peoples-justice-party-pkr-by-james-chai/>

⁴⁴ Mohd Azizi Jaeh, "Pengaruh Sosialisme Demokratik Dalam Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR): Reformasi dan Cabaran kepada Ideologi Alternatif di Malaysia (The Influences of Democratic Socialism within Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR): Reformasi and Challenges towards Alternative Ideology in Malaysia)". *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics and Strategic Studies* 44, no. 2 (December 2017): 27–50.

stint, and was replaced by Abdullah Badawi—“Mr Clean”⁴⁵—a leader antithetical to what Mahathir represented.⁴⁶

In the 2004 general election (GE11) (Table 1), PKR cooperated with PAS under BA when DAP left the pact shortly before the Sarawak state elections. PAS lost badly, reversing nearly all its gains in GE10, while DAP gained marginally.

PKR was nearly wiped out, with its president, Wan Azizah, holding on to the only seat in Permatang Pauh with a razor-thin 590-vote majority. PKR and the Reformasi movement had centred their longstanding criticism of the system on Mahathir, and voters rewarded Abdullah’s style as a breath of fresh air.

PKR’s fate became closer to that of Semangat 46. Both were formed by senior UMNO leaders who fought against Mahathir, and both cooperated with major opposition parties to challenge BN’s hegemony but failed twice. PKR’s morale dissipated badly. A lot of money was into the election by BN, with many members losing their jobs and/or facing arrests for participating in PKR activities. The party’s internal estimation that it would last only two terms seemed about to come true.⁴⁷

Then, nearly six months later, PKR’s de facto figurehead and *raison d’être* was finally released from prison.

2005–13: GOLDEN ERA—ANWAR’S RELEASE, PAKATAN RAKYAT, AND PKR’S ASCENDANCY

This began the golden era for PKR. Anwar Ibrahim was released exactly six years after he was first sacked as deputy prime minister. Rumours

⁴⁵ <https://www.scmp.com/article/424911/mr-clean>

⁴⁶ “It was like having a domineering, hyperactive, and strict headmaster for as long as you can remember, and suddenly finding him replaced by someone less confrontational and focusing on building consensus, who says the right things.” Nik Nazmi, *Malaysian Son*.

⁴⁷ H.M. Salleh, “PKR Is the Opposition Party in a Democracy in Malaysia. Crossing Borders That Crosses Generations”. *Essays in Conjunction with the Retirement of Professor Dato’ Dr Mohammad Redzuan Othman* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2018).

spread that Anwar had made a secret deal to rejoin UMNO or quit politics in exchange for his freedom,⁴⁸ but Anwar's immediate actions showed the opposite.

In the first meeting at PKR's headquarters after his release, Anwar emphasized the core identity of PKR's existence: Coalition-building.⁴⁹ At that time, DAP had left BA, and it had long been assumed that DAP and PAS could not politically and ideologically coexist. However, party leaders in these parties agreed that only Anwar could act as a mediator for potential collaboration, perhaps due to his "fuller and subtler grasp of the obstacles".⁵⁰ More importantly, PKR acted as a non-partisan intermediary for DAP and PKR because they did not clash on seat negotiations until 2008.⁵¹ No other "palatable Malay leader"⁵² had the "stature of holding top government office, multi-layered political and administrative leadership, networks across communities, and international reputation" like Anwar Ibrahim.⁵³ This was something even previous best attempts at uniting the opposition, like Tengku Razaleigh's Semangat 46, could not deliver.⁵⁴

PKR's "main role" was to act as a bridge between DAP and PAS, and also a point of compromise and "softening" for ideological opposites.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/29865>

⁴⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/31310>

⁵⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/31310>; Interview with Khoo Boo Teik (19 October 2023).

⁵¹ Khoo, *Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power*.

⁵² Interview with Sebastian Dettman, 17 October 2023.

⁵³ Khoo, *Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power*. It was not for the lack of proposition that the partnership between PAS and DAP did not happen, but also timing; the absence of such a leader who could unite the warring parties meant the time never came.

⁵⁴ Tengku Razaleigh could not deliver beyond the peculiar state of Kelantan. At that time, PAS leaders were also confined to their base, whereas Lim Kit Siang could not be accepted by the Malay voters.

⁵⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/64758>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/33279>; The enmity that existed between DAP and PAS has always been ideological rather than political since both parties rarely clashed on seats given the geographical distance between their bases. The ideological differences came down to PAS's desire to set up an Islamic State and DAP's insistence on a secular country.

To achieve this in a decade was a remarkable feat by PKR.⁵⁶ Instead of asking PAS to “abandon”⁵⁷ its pursuit for an Islamic state or to force DAP to accept the compromises required, the three parties settled on a set of common principles for cooperation. Anything that was not agreed upon by all three parties was not accepted into the common framework, and this focused the parties on defeating BN.

As a starting point, it allowed the parties to build structures for deeper cooperation years before the next general election. To negotiate seats, a seat distribution formula was devised to balance electoral strength and ambition.⁵⁸ In several states, common policy frameworks were also devised with the same goal of offering an alternative to BN’s government.

When the opposition parties made their biggest gains in 2008 by denying BN its traditional two-thirds majority in parliament, PKR-DAP-PAS formed Pakatan Rakyat (PR), the most substantive opposition coalition in Malaysian history.⁵⁹ Not only was PR formed at every state government they governed, but a working structure—the “glue”⁶⁰—was also established, including the leadership council and a joint secretariat that built the foundation and framework for PR. The coalition devised a twenty-three-page Common Policy Framework, a 100-day reform plan, collectively dubbed the “Orange Book” (*Buku Jingga*), disciplinary committee, and strategy retreats to discuss policies, media and elections.⁶¹

⁵⁶ H.M. Salleh, “PKR as the Opposition Party in a Democracy in Malaysia”.

⁵⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/33279>

⁵⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/68811>

⁵⁹ 10.9 million out of 27 million voters were registered for the election. Key issues were inflation, mounting ethnic tensions, high crime rates, and corruption. Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/79404>; Since 2008, PKR has consistently obtained 30 seats and above in every general election; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/80680>

⁶⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/114036>

⁶¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/120224>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/151327>. Before the 2008 election when PR had not been formed yet, each party had their respective manifestos; these were different but similar

PKR's unique role in PR—as the largest opposition party in parliament—was to encourage collective thinking and reach the middle ground when it came to divisive issues. Anwar described discord as “unavoidable” in a “guided democracy” and consistently warned of the need to “refrain from acrimony” in public and adopt broader thinking.⁶² The “cardinal principle” was that all policies must be agreed upon at the PR leadership council, so that the centre would hold despite “outbursts and skirmishes”.⁶³ When it came to seat negotiations, the three-year training as a coalition created a “PR mindset” acting for the coalition’s interest.⁶⁴

Although PKR was not ideologically developed at this point, the formal speeches that Anwar made influenced the economic thought of PR. As always, Anwar preferred a “synthesis of major schools rather than rigid adherence to one theory”.⁶⁵ He merged Hayekian free enterprise and Keynesian paternalism, as well as the Islamic *awsatuha* and Confucian *chung yung*, to justify differentiating fiscal approaches—free market and state intervention—during good and bad times. This was his original “humane economics”.

This became the bedrock of PR’s economic blueprint, which focused public spending on infrastructure—transportation, health, education⁶⁶—while shelving ostentatious projects, and outlawing rent-seeking activities.⁶⁷

directionally. PKR’s manifesto was called “A New Dawn for Malaysia”. Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/78701>; <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2010/02/22/pakatan-forms-disciplinary-committee>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/170295>

⁶² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/110120>

⁶³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/114036>

⁶⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/171378>

⁶⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/71485>

⁶⁶ “We don’t think that we need to apologize for advocating a policy on fuel, health care and education which is calculated to ease the burden of the rising cost of living. We call this humane economics.” Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/83165>

⁶⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/83165>

In 2006, Anwar took his economic thinking further by challenging what was unthinkable—the bumiputera-only affirmative action under the New Economic Policy (NEP). Many considered this “political suicide”, even non-Malays who thought this would upset the Malays.⁶⁸ PKR brought up the motion to dismantle the NEP and replace it with a needs-based affirmative action, called Malaysian Economic Agenda, at the party congress. It was the first time such an idea came from a Malay-majority party, and many considered this a turning point in shifting non-Malay support.⁶⁹

Anwar’s core argument was that the NEP had been abused to make the “rich richer and the poor poorer” and he found “no contradiction” in talking about “affirmative action while waving the banner of equal opportunity” in his classic “rainbow” synthesis.⁷⁰ The principles of democracy, socio-economic justice, equal economic opportunities, and religious freedom were critical in seeing the viability of needs-based affirmative action.

Perhaps Anwar’s most famous ideological synthesis was between Islam and democracy. He spoke to international audiences about concepts of human rights, the rule of law, and constitutionalism that was embedded in Muslim democracy, and how “radical Islam never stood a chance” in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago.⁷¹ He found examples in Indonesia and Turkey choosing democracy over a traditional Syariah system as hallmarks of enlightened Islamic society. Anwar drew parallels between Islamic thought of al-Shatibi’s discourse and Western thinking of

⁶⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/416333>; Nik Nazmi, *Malaysian Sun*.

⁶⁹ Nik Nazmi, *Malaysian Sun*.

⁷⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/83165>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/132947>; Other more complex economic thought on humane economics could be found here, where Anwar talked about the moral hazard of market fundamentalism and factor-price equalization theorem: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/101447>

⁷¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/76863>

Lockean ideals in showing that consultative democracy and abhorrence of tyranny were shared across civilizations.⁷²

This stream of thinking gave theoretical credibility to the pragmatism of bringing PAS and DAP under PR and breaking the Islamic State-secularism stasis, by arriving at the middle-ground of embracing the principles of democracy and freedom without abandoning Islamic foundations of fairness and justice.

Such was the important foundation for PR's cooperation, seen from its inaugural convention.⁷³ DAP secretary-general, Lim Guan Eng, topped his Malay speech with a *pantun* with the Arabic admonition of *amar maaruf nahi mungkar* (enjoining the good and forbidding the bad). PAS president Hadi Awang used Mandarin and Tamil for his greetings, endearing to their suspicious non-Malay counterparts. PKR saw itself as the multicultural platform to reconcile the ideologically opposite parties, and by extension, society itself.⁷⁴

Of course, these pursuits also came at a cost, as its opponents, UMNO, could markedly point to PR as a non-Malay threat against Malay interests, especially regarding the NEP. PKR had to constantly maintain that they were not challenging the position of Malays and bumiputeras as enshrined in the federal constitution.

Even if that had not hurt the party enough, PKR's efforts ultimately still could not overcome the fundamental differences on religious issues such as *hudud*. All it took was for UMNO to corner PAS politicians on *hudud*,⁷⁵ and PAS would concede that it was every Muslim's responsibility to implement this when they had the chance to govern. This would trigger

⁷² Imam al-Shatibi is a Spanish Islamic legal scholar, popular for his contribution to legal theory with Islamic thought, in the discussions of the *maqasid al-Shari'ah*, seeing an intersection of the fundamentals of religion, basic rules of law, and the universals of beliefs; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/114467>

⁷³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/120200>

⁷⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/133069>

⁷⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/95245>

secularists in DAP, like Karpal Singh, to draw the red line on *hudud* in their coalition.⁷⁶

The best that PKR and other PR leaders could do was to either maintain that *hudud* was not part of PR's common policy, argue that *hudud* would not affect non-Muslims, divert attention back to UMNO or issue a gag order on the potentially explosive topic.⁷⁷ This would encourage UMNO to double down on their criticisms of PR, which made it hard to argue against the claim that PR was nothing more than a coalition of convenience to defeat BN.⁷⁸

Such internal fights within PR would be public and prolonged, putting leaders in “awkward positions” that sometimes seemed “beyond reconciliation”.⁷⁹

For what it was worth, PR managed to stay as a coalition for more than seven years, and won the historic popular vote for the opposition in 2013 (GE13) (Table 1). The opposition came closest to wresting power away from BN then. PKR called for a massive protest rally post-GE13 against an election that was “stolen” through alleged fraud.⁸⁰

Within PKR, the most transformative changes also happened during this period. In 2010, the congress passed a resolution to implement the one-person-one-vote (OPOV) direct election system that expanded the maximum eligible vote to 122.⁸¹ On paper, this is the most democratic

⁷⁶ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/96051>

⁷⁷ https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2014/12/23/amid-kerfuffle-over-pass-hudud-plans-pkr-maintains-law-not-pakatan-policy/807157#google_vignette; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/96051>

⁷⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/96117>

⁷⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/96415>

⁸⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/229288>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/230183>

⁸¹ James Chai, “A Deep Dive into the People’s Justice Party”; At that time, the secretary-general claimed that PKR had 370,000 members. Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/149348>

party election in Malaysia, and promised to cut out the “unhealthy practices” of money politics and “phantom divisions”.⁸²

In practice, however, factions formed and deepened with the infamous “*cai dan*” (menu) issue, with the most vicious politicking reserved for the heir apparent—deputy president—race.⁸³ The first OPOV experiment in 2010 saw highly divisive battles between Azmin Ali, Khalid Ibrahim and Zaid Ibrahim, with poison-pen letters, war of words, collusion, fraud, and irregularities dominating the polls.⁸⁴ The drawn-out polls affected not only the party but cast negative perceptions on the coalition.⁸⁵

Notwithstanding, PKR leaders claimed success over the democratic process was better than UMNO’s.⁸⁶ Flaws were admitted and taken as a lesson; after all, only 9 out of 218 divisions (4.1 per cent) had experienced problems.⁸⁷

Though the party was electorally successful and governing the most prosperous state of Selangor since 2008 under the stewardship of a professional, Khalid Ibrahim, it still could not contain the party’s weaknesses.

At the start of this period, the former deputy president, SHA, exposed thirteen weaknesses that the party must fix,⁸⁸ including shortage of funding, factionalism, lack of discipline, and punctuality. Observers also note that the party was still dependent on Anwar as the sole authority.

⁸² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/139700>

⁸³ List of preferred candidates.

⁸⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/142372>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/143517> ; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/149258>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/146785>; DAP leader Teresa Kok advised her party to avoid “PKR-style infighting” during her party polls. Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/148959>

⁸⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/149083>

⁸⁶ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/149323>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/149419>

⁸⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/149361>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/149323>

⁸⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/44881>

Anwar's "special" charisma remained his "most easily recognizable signs".⁸⁹ In his popular public speeches, "silver-tongued" and "telepathic" Anwar was able to tell different groups "what they like to hear".⁹⁰ Even as he was serving his political ban after prison release, he could still pull in crowds, and his influence grew larger with every disruption, repression and prosecution.⁹¹ The sodomy charges against Anwar were fully exploited by him to amplify his charisma.⁹² It could be argued that the over-reliance on Anwar and his personal qualities helped distract others from PKR's internal challenges, leaving problems within remained unresolved.

PKR's finances remained "weak", as even Anwar had to operate overseas due to the "repressive" system that left opposition leaders without employment prospects.⁹³ Its openness to accept new members,

⁸⁹ Anwar reportedly had a charismatic hold on his fellow students during his early activism days. He is said to be "winsome, but not staid in private conversations" and "authoritative, not domineering" among small groups of people. Source: Khoo, *Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power*.

⁹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/11/anwar-ibrahim-moment-truth-looms>; This ability has led to many opponents considering Anwar a "political chameleon"; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/136317>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/88478>

⁹¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/65832>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/100924>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/152379>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/198961>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/126242>; The crowds that turn out to see Anwar are typically in the thousands to tens of thousands.

⁹² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/176305>

⁹³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/64758>; Anwar Ibrahim claimed that the party was in "serious debts" during its early days: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/opinions/45051>; PKR had difficulty paying for full-time staff and the office expenses during this period. This pales compared to BN's RM20 million war chest for one by-election in Batang Ai: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/100276>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/opinions/45051>; Anwar Ibrahim said that friends helped him during his time in prison, and companies consulted him on his views, which he used to cover his personal expenses. He worked as a professor overseas; Anwar Ibrahim spent one week per month when he was lecturing abroad.

especially “celebrities” for election freshmen entry, also exacerbated infamous defections and infightings.⁹⁴

PKR was primarily blamed for the 2009 Perak crisis, when two state assemblymen defected and pledged support to BN, after allegedly “millions” were dangled before them, resulting in the fall of the state government and a constitutional crisis.⁹⁵ Anwar admitted that screening was “short-sighted”, and that PKR was new then.⁹⁶

Defections and sackings were common during this period. The former secretary-general for two years, Salehuddin Hashim, quit and continued to encourage other PKR members to do so.⁹⁷ Defections of lawmakers had occurred on average once every quarter since the March 2008 elections,⁹⁸ leading to the loss of five parliamentarians including Zahrain Mohd Hashim (Bayan Baru), Tan Tee Beng (Nibong Tebal), and Wee Choo Keong (Wangsa Maju). News reports of PKR defections at the grassroots divisions were also rampant: 700 in Ipoh Barat, 200 in Taman Tunku Putra, 200 in Bayan Baru, 1,700 in Padang Serai and Kulim-Bandar Baharu.⁹⁹ Anwar hinted at potential bribery

⁹⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/70874>; Celebrities like writer Kim Quek (Yong Thye Chong), retired army Abdul Hadi Abdul Khattab, professional corporate man Koh King Kee, constitutional law expert Abdul Aziz Bari, economist Lim Teck Ghee. However, these newcomers eventually faded away, turning inactive or left the party to pursue other career interests in academia, think-tanks, or consulting.

⁹⁵ Another DAP assemblywoman also defected and pledged support to BN. The trio were Mohd Osman Mohd Jailu (PKR), Jamaluddin Mohd Radzi (PKR), and Hee Yit Foong (DAP); they appeared with deputy prime minister Najib Razak at a press conference in January 2009 after a short disappearance; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/97485>

⁹⁶ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/131830>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/124471>

⁹⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/121427>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/125381>

⁹⁸ <https://theedgemalaysia.com/article/salehuddin-denies-being-master-strategist>

⁹⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/127745>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/129054>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/129539>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/131414>

of RM2 million, and some claimed it was a “seasonal” tactic from his opponents.¹⁰⁰

It led to PKR leaders constantly needing to assure its members that it was not “sinking” and its coalition partners that it was not in a crisis.¹⁰¹ It might be true that PKR was just going through a developmental stage, like PAS when it was younger, that defections were regular before the party became stronger, and that party-hoppers were “prepubescent politicians”.¹⁰² This experience, however, compelled the party to focus on quality over quantity and better filtering mechanisms.¹⁰³

2014–18: ALL-IN FOR POWER—ANWAR IMPRISONED AGAIN, AND THE IMPOSSIBLE VICTORY

This period was one of the most tumultuous periods for PKR because it lost its leader, its coalition, and its leadership position in the opposition.

At 3.00 pm on 15 February 2015, PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim was brought to the Sungai Buloh prison for the second heavily criticised sodomy conviction.¹⁰⁴ Unlike the first conviction, the leadership absence now affected not only PKR but also the PR coalition which, although winning big in GE13, was at the brink of a breakup due to *hudud* and the Selangor menteri besar (MB) crisis, among others.¹⁰⁵ PKR argued that

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/134849>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/131830>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/125473>

¹⁰² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/126081>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/131895>

¹⁰³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/132947>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/156735>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.cfr.org/blog/malaysias-sham-trial>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/288844>; It was also notable that unlike the first sodomy trial, PAS president Hadi Awang seemed reluctant to back Anwar on the second sodomy charge. Instead, Hadi used the sodomy verdict to promote syariah law. Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/288889>

jailing Anwar was meant to break PR, sink PKR into “internal turmoil”, limit the opposition’s attack on BN, and erase Anwar from the people’s memory.¹⁰⁶

One may argue that the Selangor MB crisis, precipitated by the Kajang Move a year ago, a political manoeuvre to install Anwar Ibrahim as MB to replace Khalid Ibrahim, strained ties between PKR and PAS. Anwar pursued the strategy allegedly without proper consultation of PAS leaders, and when Anwar was denied from contesting, PAS submitted different names to PKR and DAP on the MB candidate.¹⁰⁷ Eventually Azmin Ali was appointed as Selangor MB, but it planted early seeds of a fissure between Anwar and Azmin, and also created a rift between PAS and PKR.

Anwar’s 2015 sodomy verdict came just days after the passing of PAS spiritual leader, Nik Aziz (TGNA), who played a bridging role in PAS for ideologically dissimilar partners.¹⁰⁸ When TGNA retired, cracks within PR had started, and his death created more impetus towards PR’s eventual demise.

As widely expected, Hadi accelerated PAS’s pursuit of *hudud*, as he “bulldoze[d]” the bill in parliament unilaterally.¹⁰⁹ Since DAP had stated clearly that it would not support *hudud*, the dilemma fell on PKR,¹¹⁰ most

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/289576>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2015/03/26/savaged-over-hudud-pas-ulama-reminds-dap-of-pkr-kajang-move/866831>; PKR and DAP submitted Wan Azizah as the sole MB candidate, whereas PAS submitted three names including Azmin Ali. That meant that Azmin Ali’s candidacy was not endorsed by his own party. Source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140923235853/http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/09/21/PKR-will-not-support-Azmin-if-he-becomes-Selangor-MB/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/289138>

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/292625>; The Hudud Bill that Hadi proposed was to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 to remove the limits on punishments imposed by the syariah courts, to make way for *hudud* law.

¹¹⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/293341>

of whose leaders were Muslims who were pressured by Hadi to support. In the end, PKR reached a unanimous decision¹¹¹ to not support *hudud* as it was a “unilateral decision without notice” and “contravened” the PR leadership council decision previously.¹¹²

Since then, PR was destined to collapse. DAP accused Hadi of “serial treachery”¹¹³ by virtue of his pushing *hudud* and his “inability to keep his promises”. At the party congress, Hadi fired back at his allies, at DAP for touching on faith and PAS’s ulama party leadership, and at PKR for “stealing” its party members.¹¹⁴ DAP rejected PKR’s offer to mediate,¹¹⁵ and without Anwar’s “dynamic leadership”, PR was dissolved on 16 June 2015.

However, PKR’s belief in coalitions did not change, as it quickly formed Pakatan Harapan (PH) in September 2015 with a splinter party from PAS, called Amanah, consisting of moderate Islamic leaders.

Less than a year later, however, the re-emergence of 91-year-old former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, tested PKR’s coalition instincts to the limits.¹¹⁶ Mahathir worked with PH and other civil society groups under the “Save Malaysia” campaign to defeat BN, which eventually culminated in the “Citizens’ Declaration”.¹¹⁷

While DAP welcomed Mahathir’s support, the problems it presented to PKR were twofold. First was whether PKR was willing to work with Mahathir, given their past acrimonious relationship. Second was whether

¹¹¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/292707>

¹¹² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/292751>; The party also stated that it would not support it based on the principles of *Fiqh Al-Awlawiyyat* (*fiqh* of priorities), *Maslahat Ummah* (public interest) and *Maqasid Syariah* (higher objectives of Syariah). Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/292751>

¹¹³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/292742>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/300973>

¹¹⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/301083>

¹¹⁶ Progressive PAS leaders left the party shortly after PR’s dissolution to form a moderate Islamic party called Amanah.

¹¹⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/331955>

Anwar would still be able to be the opposition's prime minister candidate for the next election (GE14).

After a scathing letter spelling the dangers of working with Mahathir,¹¹⁸ Anwar warmed up to the idea when he described Mahathir's formation of a new party as a "positive step".¹¹⁹ This period of confusion for PKR and its members was understandably long, as its leaders balanced the downsides of working with Mahathir and his bumiputera-only Bersatu,¹²⁰ and the potential efficacy in winning Putrajaya. It was only at Anwar's trial at the High Court in September 2016 that things changed.

The iconic photo of Anwar and Mahathir shaking hands and greeting each other in the courtroom—their first meeting in 18 years and 3 days—was a turning point.¹²¹ While Anwar avoided answering questions about trusting Mahathir, he said Mahathir seemed to support the reform agenda, giving PKR the openness to engage.¹²²

This was vital for PKR party members, especially *Otai Reformasi* (earliest 1998 supporters), as it signalled for the party members to accept Mahathir.¹²³ It proved that a loose organization like PKR relied heavily on the instructions of its charismatic leader, Anwar. This is unsurprising as the founding of the party was intimately related to Anwar's personal suffering.

The single detail of the photo also "sketch[ed] an ideological picture"¹²⁴ for the opposition as the raging 1MDB scandal and the institutional defects weighed heavier than personal feud and suffering¹²⁵—even

¹¹⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/341735>

¹¹⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/349247>

¹²⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/351774>

¹²¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/354723>. The two leaders chatted for 50 minutes in the witness room later.

¹²² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/354751>

¹²³ Interview with an *Otai Reformasi*, 16 November 2023.

¹²⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/356238>

¹²⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/355160>

though Anwar did not say this himself. Mahathir and Bersatu knew that the opposition alliance could not work without Anwar's endorsement,¹²⁶ and Anwar's family played a role in ending discussions within PKR for Mahathir to apologize to Anwar.

This helped move the opposition into the realm of possibility, though it did not resolve the leadership issue. Bersatu, at that time, was led by Mahathir and former deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin, and thus gave the impression that PKR's leadership role in the opposition and Anwar's prime ministerial candidacy was not guaranteed. Bersatu had to iterate Wan Azizah's position as opposition leader, but was non-committal on Anwar's release and prime ministership.¹²⁷

PKR's internal factionalism also reared its head behind the scenes. The inclusion of Bersatu into PH impeded Azmin Ali's rise, as his seniority now ranked lower in a larger coalition. It was reported that he used this leadership uncertainty to pitch for a prime minister or deputy position should the opposition win Putrajaya—creating internal disunity amidst chaotic external negotiations with Mahathir.¹²⁸ While this happened behind curtains, factionalism did not feature as much during this period, though the seeds for a split were planted.

In the end, the opposition was able to agree on three vital arrangements:

- Mahathir to be PH's prime ministerial candidate and Wan Azizah as the deputy;
- The new government would expedite the release and pardon of Anwar; and
- Anwar to be appointed the eighth prime minister, after Mahathir.

This came after intense negotiations on leadership structure, and new government's to-dos, and seat negotiations. At one point, the disagreements

¹²⁶ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/355365>

¹²⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/357066>

¹²⁸ Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, *9 May 2018: Notes from the Frontline* (Selangor: SIRD, 2019).

on leadership were at an impasse, with Mahathir threatening to withdraw from PH, but was saved when Nurul Izzah Anwar went to persuade Mahathir to stay on.¹²⁹ Bersatu's desire to contest the most seats—on the premise of Malay assurance—also showed a dominant tendency that would act as a flashpoint for the PH government's internal tussles and eventual collapse.

Two months before GE14, PH released its 150-page manifesto, called “Book of Hope”.¹³⁰ There is popular consensus that this manifesto of everything contained a laundry list of sixty-plus promises which came to burden the government, prompting Mahathir to call the manifesto “not a Bible”.¹³¹ In it, however, it contained the classic ideological synthesis that PKR was used to, including fiscal correction of targeted petrol subsidies and also fiscal expansion items like abolishing the GST.¹³² It saw economic growth and environmental protection as compatible, and bumiputera affirmative action to be in line with welfare of the poor.¹³³

On 9 May 2018, PH succeeded in Malaysia's first-ever government turnover, winning 121 seats. PKR became the largest party in government, with 47 seats, and the first multiracial party to achieve that (Table 1).

A week later, Anwar was released from jail and pardoned by the King, and was hailed as the “hero of Malaysia's opposition politics”.¹³⁴ In conjunction with PKR's twentieth anniversary, Anwar said PKR's primary contribution to the turnover was ending the “arrogance and destructiveness” of those in power.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/03/10/what-you-need-to-know-about-pakatans-ge14-manifesto/1594915#google_vignette

¹³¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/434416>

¹³² Goods and Services Tax.

¹³³ https://dl.dapmalaysia.org/repository/Manifesto_PH_EN.pdf

¹³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv3DFQ1r2ec>

¹³⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/470863>

2019–22: LESSONS ON RESTRAINTS— FINALLY, ANWAR AS PRIME MINISTER

The final period is about PKR’s lesson on restraint in its pursuit for big-tent strategy and loose organization. Mahathir’s refusal to hand over to Anwar, the Sheraton Move and the collapse of the PH government, and the purge of Azmin’s “cartel” taught PKR the limits of extending its core identity. This section will not consider ideological development as this was minimal aside from a more tempered version of the manifesto for GE15.¹³⁶

The biggest contention on the handover issue was the timeline. Anwar supporters believed that Mahathir should hand over the premiership before two years, while the detractors claimed that no timeline was set in writing.¹³⁷ Mahathir’s changing stance and timeline were also unhelpful, deploying broad terms such as “over two years” or “two years plus”, or another candidate altogether.¹³⁸ Anwar had to constantly assure his supporters by meeting Mahathir weekly, stopping short of insisting on an exact date.¹³⁹ There were also rumours of a plot to deny Anwar from succeeding.¹⁴⁰

In the same period, PKR’s internal divisions intensified. Azmin’s “cartel” faction started publicly attacking Anwar, after disagreeing with the president’s leadership council appointments, especially on Saifuddin Nasution’s secretary-general post.¹⁴¹ PKR vice-president Zuraida Kamaruddin, part of Azmin’s faction, decried “cowards” and “dictators”

¹³⁶ <https://kitaboleh.my/>

¹³⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/493685>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/493819>

¹³⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/458567>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/532071>

¹³⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/500748>

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/458871>

¹⁴¹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/458090>

in the party.¹⁴² Rumours spread as early as January 2019 that Azmin might head a movement to leave PKR, and/or join Mahathir's Bersatu; in fact, he appeared at a Bersatu event.¹⁴³

Azmin Ali was first recommended by Mahathir to Anwar as the latter's personal secretary, when Anwar was a minister.¹⁴⁴ The mentor-protégé continued when Anwar was deputy prime minister, and even after he had been sacked and jailed, with Azmin helping to set up the new PKR. The MB crisis in 2014, mooting the Muhyiddin-Azmin combination for prime minister and deputy in 2016, and Mahathir's appointment of Azmin as economic affairs minister in 2018 all contributed to drawing divisions between Anwar and Azmin.¹⁴⁵

The tension escalated in 2019 when Azmin's "cartel" refused to attend meetings;¹⁴⁶ instead, it asked Anwar for a reconciliation meeting between the factions.¹⁴⁷ Though Anwar said that Azmin was not immune to disciplinary action, none were taken against him.¹⁴⁸

PKR's internal tension reached a boiling point when lewd videos allegedly featuring someone like Azmin were circulated.¹⁴⁹ Anwar denied that he or his supporters were involved in the circulation of the

¹⁴² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/460131>; Both Azmin and Zuraida's grassroots base in PKR was considered substantial, with the latter's group being loyal and effective at mobilizing especially during party elections.

¹⁴³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/458793>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/492049>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/492154>

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/explained/article/3042113/how-anwar-ibrahim-and-azmin-alis-mentor-protege-relationship>

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/04/21/muhyiddin-not-accidental-pm-push-began-in-2016-says-liew/>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/553203>

¹⁴⁶ Neither the political bureau nor leadership council meeting. Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/490355>

¹⁴⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/490831>

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/491570>

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/479808>

videos,¹⁵⁰ and the party sacked the member, Haziq Abdullah, who claimed responsibility for being in the video. It was speculated that this incident convinced Azmin to do something drastic, as he had lost credibility in the party and the support of his president, who holds most of the membership support.¹⁵¹

The party's loose organization allowed factions to fester, and the dependency on Anwar meant that whoever failed to get Anwar's support would have to directly confront the president to survive. This resulted in an unprecedented parallel congress in late 2019.¹⁵² Despite Anwar's best efforts to compromise by giving Azmin the opening for PKR youth and women wings¹⁵³—as was the convention for PKR deputy presidents—tensions did not.

The 2019 PKR congress was marred by a violent ruckus and fighting, boycotts, poor attendance, walkouts, public spats, and a parallel dinner party by the “cartel” mimicking a parallel congress.¹⁵⁴ Azmin's cartel's main claim was that they were the founders of the party who should not be indirectly labelled “traitors” and nobody more junior should question their commitment to the struggle.¹⁵⁵

Within two months, Azmin and ten PKR members of parliament (MPs) were instrumental in orchestrating the largest defection that collapsed the PH government led by Mahathir at the Sheraton Hotel

¹⁵⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/479798>

¹⁵¹ Interview with an *Otai Reformasi*, 16 November 2023.

¹⁵² <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502169>

¹⁵³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502404>

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502588> and <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502629> ; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502673>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502831>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502697>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502766>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502795>; The “dinner” event was held at the Renaissance Hotel in Kuala Lumpur, the place of PKR's founding. Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502790>

¹⁵⁵ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502795>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/502888>

(“Sheraton Move”).¹⁵⁶ During the height of the Anwar-Azmin spat, Azmin made clear that he was not supportive of the handover to Anwar, saying that the handover was “only in spirit” and was “without [a] fixed timeline”.¹⁵⁷

The Sheraton Move was crafted without Anwar’s knowledge, and was considered “treacherous” and a “betrayal” to him and the party.¹⁵⁸ After Azmin’s “week-long struggle” to form a new government led by Muhyiddin Yassin, he took ten MPs out of PKR, including vice-president Zuraida, leadership council members Saifuddin Abdullah, Rashid Hasnon, and Kamaruddin Jaafar (Annex C).¹⁵⁹ This was followed by lower-level rebellion and exits, though party members claimed the number was smaller than claimed.¹⁶⁰ Among the defectors’ claims was that the leadership was biased and merely a tool for “Anwar’s ambition to become prime minister”.

Notwithstanding, PKR leaders went through an extensive purge and reconciliation with remaining “cartel” members. This purge was never complete as some, like Selangor menteri besar Amiruddin Shari,

¹⁵⁶ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/500327> and <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/496441>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/511910>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/525424>

¹⁵⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/496894>

¹⁵⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/523152>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/511951>

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/512745> ; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/512030>; The ten were part of the twenty-eight PKR MPs who criticized Anwar for not issuing a statement on the lewd video allegedly involving Azmin Ali. Source: <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2019/07/586365/28-anggota-mpp-ahli-parlimen-pkr-tegur-anwar>

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/581260>; <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/532998>; A long-time PKR member claimed that Azmin’s cartel strength primarily relied on Zuraida’s base which was larger and mobilized better. However, when they both left and Zuraida decided not to join Azmin in Bersatu, and others stayed back in PKR, their collective strength was diluted and this hastened their political irrelevance. (Interview with an *Otai Reformasi*, 16 November 2023).

decided to stay and prove their loyalty. In fact, Amiruddin stayed and convinced others to not join Azmin; after all, they had the largesse of state government, and the PKR machinery was still stronger than that of smaller parties.¹⁶¹ Former cartel members were also pitted against Azmin's faction in Bersatu in another attempt to prove loyalty.

As PKR approached GE15 in 2022, their approach to big-tent had largely changed, partly due to lessons learnt from GE14—on the perils of partnering with Mahathir for the sake of winning and the benefit of a three-cornered fight with PAS and BN—and partly due to the new deputy presidency of Rafizi Ramli who rejected an opposition big-tent strategy.¹⁶² This was an evolution in PKR's DNA. The party had pursued coalition relentlessly even when it was hard (PR and PH with Mahathir), and finally now was placing limits to the big-tent approach by picking allies meaningfully and strategically.

This strategy paid off; PH had enough seats to win the right to negotiate to form a government (Table 1). It was also the coalition-building identity that PKR had that enabled it to form a post-election unity government and place forth Anwar as the tenth prime minister.

Internally, having gone through its most dramatic divide-and-renew phase would likely compel the party to be more selective in filtering and disciplining its members. Massive defections in the earlier periods provided warnings to the party, and it had to pay a heavy price, especially as defectors included many founding members. However, this also gave space to the younger leadership led by Anwar Ibrahim and Rafizi Ramli to carve a new path.

CONCLUSION: WHAT COMES AFTER ANWAR?

No matter what comes next, the identity foundational to PKR will persist: Pursuit of big-tents, ideological synthesis, and personality-driven loose

¹⁶¹ Interview with an *Otai Reformasi*, 16 November 2023.

¹⁶² <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/03/24/pkrs-rafizi-says-pakatan-must-abandon-the-big-tent-approach-go-solo-for-ge1/2049259>

organizations. Though it may change in style, the qualitative nature will likely feature in the background.

For its big-tent DNA, the concern for PKR is to maintain its electoral competitiveness without diluting its party's strength. The larger the coalition or partnership, the less likely PKR would expand and grow. For instance, should PKR decide to go into the next election with the unity government parties, it might reduce competitors but not gain more seats for itself. Internally, the big-tent of allowing party members of all stripes to enter easily will not be of substantive benefit if the members remain unengaged. Instead, if poorly managed, factionalism might arise again and split the party.

On its ideological synthesis, PKR as the governing party now has the pressure to show results as Anwar is now prime minister. It is easier to synthesize in theory and harder to prove this in practice. In essence, Anwar's Madani concept of governing is the result of his decades-long ideological synthesis, but it has proven difficult to grasp, especially through the policies and narratives that his government presents. If done well, Anwar might succeed in bringing parties together on a common belief; if done poorly, it may anger all parties.

Lastly, the question of PKR's loose organization and dependency on personality could not avoid the question of succession. Within the party, there has never been serious discussions about succession, especially when Anwar is at the peak of its powers as prime minister. It is also highly unstrategic to discuss PKR's succession as it would significantly affect the leadership of the unity government, since PH as the largest coalition does not have another leader with Anwar's background, influence, and authority.

The last time this was brought up was in 2015, before Anwar went to prison. When Anwar was asked who would take over when he was gone, he dismissed the point of the discussion and left it to the party to decide.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Interview with a PKR leadership council member, 12 October 2023.

Though there is no clarity on this, it is likely going to be decided only when it becomes necessary, by the party, and the way the party usually makes decisions. Notwithstanding, party leaders are confident that the party is mature with strengths on its own, separate from Anwar.¹⁶⁴ What we do know is that whoever takes over the reins will likely go through unprecedented experiences, including a contested presidency, starting as a governing party, a younger leadership, and the need to re-establish coalition leadership.

¹⁶⁴ Interviews with PKR leaders, October and November 2023.

ANNEX A

Significant PKR Milestones Since 1998

Date	Milestone
2 September 1998	Anwar Ibrahim sacked as deputy prime minister by prime minister Mahathir Mohamad
3 September 1998	UMNO supreme council sacked Anwar Ibrahim as deputy president of UMNO
6 September 1998	ABIM led a few NGOs to form GERAK as a protest movement against Anwar's sacking.
12 September 1998	Anwar published the Permatang Pauh Declaration, the movement's earliest organizing document.
20 September 1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largest Reformasi protest in Dataran Merdeka and Masjid Negara • Anwar Ibrahim was arrested by balaclava-clad police commandos at his residence in Bukit Damansara, Selangor, and detained under the Internal Security Act.
10 December 1998	ADIL was officially launched, with Wan Azizah as its first president.
4 April 1999	Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN) was officially launched at the Renaissance Hotel, taking over Ikatan Masyarakat Islam Malaysia.
14 April 1999	Anwar Ibrahim was sentenced to 6 years in prison for corruption.
8 August 2000	Anwar Ibrahim was sentenced to 9 years in prison for sodomy.

continued on next page

ANNEX A — *cont'd*

Date	Milestone
27–30 September 1999	Seven activists including PKN and PRM leaders were arrested and prevented from contesting in elections.
29 November 1999	GE10: PKN was part of the Barisan Alternatif opposition pact that collectively won 42 out of 193 seats (PKN won 5 seats).
3 August 2003	PKN renamed Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) after merger with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM).
21 March 2004	GE10: Barisan Alternatif (PAS and PKR) lost seats and PKR was left with only 1 parliamentary seat.
2 September 2004	Anwar Ibrahim freed from prison after the Federal Court overturned the conviction.
1 April 2008	Pakatan Rakyat was formed consisting of PKR, PAS, and DAP.
8 March 2008	GE12: Pakatan Rakyat, led by PKR, won 82 seats and denied the incumbent Barisan Nasional a two-thirds majority for the first time.
14 April 2008	Anwar Ibrahim celebrated his official return to politics after his ban from public office expired.
7 August 2008	Anwar Ibrahim charged with sodomy charges for the second time.
26 August 2008	Anwar Ibrahim won the Permatang Pauh by-election with a 15,671-vote majority.

24 January 2009	Defections started in the Perak state assembly, resulting in the eventual collapse of the Perak state government led by Pakatan Rakyat.
10 June 2009	PKR introduced a one-person-one-vote direct election system.
5 May 2013	GE13: Pakatan Rakyat won 50.9% of the popular vote but did not gain enough seats (89 seats) to take over the government.
27 January 2014	State assemblyman of Kajang, Lee Chin Cheh, stepped down for Anwar Ibrahim to run as a candidate in preparation for Anwar to become the next Selangor menteri besar. The “Kajang Move” eventually did not materialize as desired, as the Court of Appeal rushed through a unanimous decision to sentence Anwar to imprisonment.
10 February 2015	Anwar Ibrahim sentenced to 5 years imprisonment for Sodomy 2.0.
22 September 2015	Pakatan Harapan was formed consisting of PKR, Amanah, DAP, and UPKO.
9 May 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GE14: Pakatan Harapan won GE14 with an outright majority, the first government turnover in history. • Anwar Ibrahim freed from prison and was granted full pardon.
13 October 2018	Anwar Ibrahim won the Port Dickson by-election upon the resignation of Danyal Balagopal Abdullah, with a 23,560-vote majority.

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ANNEX A — *cont'd*

Date	Milestone
23 February 2020	PKR's deputy president Azmin Ali and other lawmakers gathered at Sheraton Hotel, Petaling Jaya, to plan for a government takeover, which became known as the Sheraton Move.
1 March 2020	Muhyiddin Yassin was sworn in as the eighth prime minister after the collapse of the Mahathir-led Pakatan Harapan government.
19 November 2022	GE15: Pakatan Harapan won 82 seats out of 222.
24 November 2022	Anwar Ibrahim sworn in as Malaysia's 10th prime minister, leading a "Unity Government".

ANNEX B

List of Opposition Alliances in Malaysia Since 1955

Year	Opposition Alliance	Component Parties
1955	None	None
1959	Barisan Sosialis (Malayan Peoples' Socialist Front)	Parti Buruh Malaya
		Parti Rakyat Malaysia
1964	Barisan Sosialis (Malayan Peoples' Socialist Front)	Parti Buruh Malaya
		Parti Rakyat Malaysia
		Parti Perhimpunan Kebangsaan
1969	None	None
1974	None	None
1978	None	None
1982	None	None
1986	None	None
1990	Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah	Semangat 46
		PAS
	Gagasan Rakyat	DAP
		United Sabah Party
1995	Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah	Parti Melayu Semangat 46
		PAS
	Gagasan Rakyat	DAP
		United Sabah Party
1999	Barisan Alternatif	PAS
		DAP
		Parti Keadilan Nasional
		Parti Rakyat Malaysia
2004	Barisan Alternatif	PAS
		PKR

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2008	Pakatan Rakyat	PKR
		PAS
		DAP
2013	Pakatan Rakyat	PKR
		PAS
		DAP
2018	Pakatan Harapan	PKR
		PAS
		DAP
		Bersatu
		Warisan (ally)
	Gagasan Sejahtera	PAS
		BERJASA (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front)
		Parti Ikatan Bangsa Malaysia
		Parti Cinta Malaysia (ally)
	Gabungan Sabah Bersatu	Parti Harapan Rakyat Sabah
		Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku
		Parti Maju Sabah
		Parti Perpaduan Rakyat Sabah

ANNEX C

Azmin Ali And MPs Who Left PKR After Sheraton Move 2020

No.	Name	Constituency	Last held party position in PKR
1	Azmin Ali	Gombak	Deputy president
2	Zuraida Kamaruddin	Ampang	Vice-president
3	Saifuddin Abdullah	Indera Mahkota	Central leadership council member
4	Baru Bian	Selangau	Chairman of PKR Sarawak and central leadership council member
5	Kamaruddin Jaafar	Bandar Tun Razak	Central leadership council member
6	Mansor Othman	Nibong Tebal	Central leadership council member
7	Rashid Hasnon	Batu Pahat	Central leadership council member
8	Edmund Santhara Kumar	Segamat	Deputy Secretary General and central leadership council member
9	Ali Biju	Saratok	Vice-president
10	Willie Mongin	Puncak Borneo	None
11	Jonathan Yasin	Ranau	None

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