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IT is funny to hear my friends in the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) complaining that civil society is pressuring only the opposition coalition to revive local elections and not the Barisan Nasional (BN). It becomes more hilarious now that the PR has reportedly reduced its commitment to merely "[strengthening local democracy](#) ." One unnamed leader defends it as "a matter of semantics ... about how we are saying it."

For the record, this is the semantic difference that voters may want to take note of. The [DAP's 2008 manifesto](#) called for "[implementing] local government elections", while Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)'s 2008 manifesto called for "[reinstating] with immediate effect local elections."

In the 2008, the [People's Declaration](#) was initiated by civil society and all the eventual PR coalition partners signed up to it. The Declaration committed "to pass the necessary legislations to provide for local elections."

In another document which all three parties committed themselves to, the [Coalition for Clean and Fair Election](#)'s joint communiqué in 2006, they recognised the long-term need to "re-introduce elections for local authorities at city, municipal, district and village levels with an electoral system which is free and fair, and enables Malaysians to participate actively."

Why is it funny or hilarious to see the PR backpedalling?

Local elections need PR?

PR leaders apparently think that local elections need them more than they need local elections. Local elections will need them if they win the next federal election or continue to control the few states they currently govern.

The PR's fear of local elections could be that autonomously powerful local councillors may defy party bosses. Or, they could be afraid of the "racial composition in major towns" — a euphemism for the perceived dominance of liberals and non-Malay Malaysians in local councils.

These two reasons, however, are not equivalent to the legal obstacles they claim are hindering their introduction of local elections. If this is the case, then winning federal power will probably only make the PR more reluctant to introduce local democracy. And if that is the case, civil society will have to plead even harder to the PR for some change. That's realpolitik.

But how sure is the PR that it will win Putrajaya or continue to control the states it currently governs?

If it loses the next federal election, can it survive as a coalition without local elections? The PR would probably laugh at this question — the cause for local elections has too often been framed as an issue of democracy and good governance, rather than one of realpolitik and the party system

PR needs local elections

The feasibility and survival of the PR, not unlike the BN, lies in both the payoff and prospect of power and inter-ethnic balance.

Despite winning 43% of the popular vote in 1990, the two coalitions and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) won only 49 out of 180 parliamentary seats, or 27%. The inter-ethnic/-religious imbalance in the opposition camp — the non-Muslim DAP with 20 seats, Muslim PAS and Semangat 46 with 15, and East Malaysian PBS with 14 — did not help. Soon, PAS and Semangat 46 quarrelled in Kelantan, and the DAP felt betrayed by both PAS's Islamisation agenda and Semangat 46's resurgent Malay nationalism.

The same fate was repeated with Barisan Alternatif (BA) in 1999. With about 39% of the popular vote, the coalition won only 42 out of 193 parliamentary seats, or 22%. The inter-ethnic/-religious balance was also far from perfect: PAS dominated with 27 seats, the DAP had 10, and Parti Keadilan Nasional failed in its function as the intermediary with a mere five seats. Within two years, [the DAP quit the BA](#) to distance itself from PAS's Islamisation agenda and Keadilan's failure to check PAS.

"Why can't politicians be more farsighted, putting the nation before their party and individual gains?" the idealist in you might ask.

The short answer is that politicians are mortals like you, not angels. The longer answer is that politicians behave like two different species in legislative and executive roles.

Legislators — from both sides of the aisle — are normally more combative as their role is to question the government or the opposing camp and expose flaws and errors. By design, they need to only represent a particular geographical or social constituency rather than the entire society, hence their tendency to play to the gallery.

On the other hand, ministers need to run the country as a team. They need to take on board various interests and therefore be more moderate. Such behavior is in turn rewarded by having greater power than legislators. This explains why certain firebrand politicians mellow after joining government. However, in the Malaysian context, running an almost mono-ethnic state like Terengganu may not require politicians to be more inclusive. And of course, even in multiethnic Selangor, we still find state ministers like Datuk Dr [Hasan Ali](#) , who act more like legislative combatants.

How the PR might perish

The PR is viable only if the leaders of its component parties have to run multiethnic Malaysia like a responsible government, or have to imagine themselves doing so. Otherwise, it may break up like its predecessors of the last two decades.

The PR's survival requires one of these three conditions:

1) The PR wins federal power or at least survives as a strong federal opposition to offer hopes of future ministership.

2) The PR wins enough state governments especially in multiethnic states to promote inclusive and collaborative behaviour.

3) The PR controls enough local authorities, especially in multiethnic areas, to cultivate similarly inclusive and collaborative practices.

Without local elections, the second and third alternatives are collapsed into one. Thus, when the PR lost Perak, it also lost Ipoh, Taiping, Kuala Kangsar, Kampar and all the other towns.

Introducing local elections, like buying insurance, spreads the political risk. If PR-held states manage to introduce local elections, the coalition does run the risk of losing some local councils to the BN. But there will then be tremendous pressure for BN-held states to also introduce local elections, which might inadvertently offer the PR the opportunity to make inroads.

(Dice by straymuse / sxc.hu) In contrast, resisting local elections is, in effect, political gambling — betting that the PR will emerge victorious in the winner-takes-all game.

Why is the PR's resistance to local elections hilarious? Because their arrogance today will not win them any sympathy if they get thrown out of Umno's electoral one-party casino tomorrow.

Had the parties won far fewer seats in March 2008, even if they subsequently came together, they would probably have split soon after. That was why the [Gagasan Rakyat-Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah](#) coalitions lasted for just one parliamentary term.