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### What's Keeping Malaysia's Opposition Together?

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## PAKATAN RAKYAT'S MORAL COMPACT

# What's keeping Malaysia's Opposition together?

BRIDGET WELSH



What keeps the Malaysian opposition Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance) together? The quick answer often given is the common search of political power.

While power frames the relationships between three disparate political parties — Islamist PAS, secular-committed Democratic Action Party and the umbrella reform-oriented PKR of Mr Anwar Ibrahim — it is not the glue of the opposition alliance. Were this the case, PAS would have left the coalition when UMNO floated the offer of joining the government in 2008 and intense jockeying took place within PAS.

The answer lies in the three parties' shared moral compact. Pakatan Rakyat is an alliance of profoundly different backgrounds, with secularists, theocrats, conservatives and progressives working together. In a world wracked with tensions over religion and misunderstandings, Malaysia's opposition stands out in bucking international trends of difference.

## CORRUPTION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Three common principles bind the Opposition together. The first is deep concern with endemic corruption.

The problem of corruption is not new, and while Malaysia's practices are assessed above many in Asia, including Indonesia, what has become increasingly apparent is that it has crossed the line of acceptability for many Malaysians. Survey results show that an overwhelming majority view their officials as corrupt and believe that their officials do not abide

by the law.

Scandal after scandal, from the National Feedlot Corporation and Scorpene, to the recent revelations about the extension of the Ampang LRT, has inundated citizens. While there are many civil servants who work hard to deliver services, there are pressures within the system to conform to predatory practices.

Malaysian corruption was initially concentrated among the elite through the practice of "money politics". But more and more, it is extending into everyday issues such as school fees, crime prevention and service provision.

Most basic food items, such as sugar and rice, are tied to non-transparent deals of politically-aligned businessmen, as are bigger items such as cars through Approved Permit licence allocations.

These weaknesses in governance share a common moral thread — a privileged minority using the system to their advantage, and this is hurting the majority and widening inequality.

## FAIRNESS AND THE PLAYING FIELD

This leads to the second shared principle — fairness. The three political parties each have a different take on what is fair, but there are areas of similarity: Namely, everyone should have a seat at the table; everyone should be treated fairly in a court of law; and social and economic inequalities should be minimised.

This shared view of fairness extends into the outrage over unfair legal decisions and deep-seated concerns about poverty and displacement of many Malaysians. Pakatan's conception of citizenship has evolved into one in which all Malaysians are

exactly that — Malaysians. It is a modern view of citizenship, in which everyone has rights and the government is to respond to the people, not the other way round.

The Opposition's moral compact is also driven by a mutual interest in expanding democratic governance to level the political playing field.

Calls for the removal of the Internal Security Act (which was suspended and replaced by the more benign but less tested Security Offences Act earlier this year), electoral reform, freedoms of assembly, religion and speech, among other things, all fall under the umbrella of expanding political space and rights.

Ever since the reformasi movement of 1999, opposition activists have joined forces in highlighting democratic deficits and showcasing reasons for an expansion of democracy. Each protest and political crisis has brought the opposition together — from Bersih 1.0 in 2007, to the defections and subsequent takeover of the Perak state government in 2009. The bonds forged by protesting together are strong.

Since 2008, there have been significant efforts to rupture the Opposition's moral compact on multiple fronts. The charges of sodomy and corruption have been tied to attempts to discredit opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and raise doubts about his moral calibre to lead. The introduction of issues such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual (LGBT) rights puts pressure on the relationship between the liberals and others within the Pakatan Rakyat.

The sensitive "Allah" issue that rose to the fore in 2010 tested the Islamists' position. The push for Malay rights under the rubric Ketuanan Melayu reflects efforts to rein-

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force ethnic supremacy over shared humanity and equality, to reimpose the social contract of the past.

Each of these issues has not broken the ties between the opposition actors, and it is in part due to the prominence of the underlying principles that bring them together.

## THE PROBLEM OF HUDUD

This is not a moral compact without problems, however. The biggest challenge for the Opposition lies within. It has to do with an issue being negotiated throughout the Muslim world: The place and form of Islamic law, notably hudud.

Globally, Islamist political parties from AKP in Turkey to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt are grappling with how to bring about Islamic governance while maintaining rights. For liberals, the introduction of measures such as hudud violates the shared democratic ideals, as there remains deep mistrust of Islamists in office.

For secularists, hudud violates their view of governance. Doubts persist in some quarters about whether the Islamists will continue to hold to the ideals in office, respect different religious rights and, importantly, tolerate difference within their own community.

Detractors point to Algeria and Iran as testimony to a potential violation of trust. Others more open-minded highlight the negotiated paths of Turkey and Morocco.

For Malaysia, the hudud issue remains on the agenda, unresolved and unlikely to be so before polls. In public remarks, Mr Anwar has stressed the centrality of dialogue and principle of consensus. There appears to be a working agreement to agree to disagree.

Among Islamists there has been a global trend towards greater accommodation of difference and an appreciation of constitutional frameworks for governance. Many in the PAS old guard, nevertheless, are tied to the vision of a religious theocracy that is increasingly becoming outmoded, even in Egypt where the President comes from one of the historically strongest advocates of these measures, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Islamists the world over are having to reprioritise their principles in order to govern societies, and PAS will have to as well. What is important is that it will need to do this on its own terms, rather than respond to ultimatums from allies and opponents alike.

Hudud will remain salient to this campaign, because at its core, it puts pressure on Malaysia's Opposition to reassess, reaffirm and reinforce their common moral priorities. It is this common ground however, that is Pakatan's moral compact — and for now it is on firm ground.

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