

# Politics and Organisation in Opposition

*by* Gatut Priyowidodo

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## Politics and Organization in Opposition: Patterns of Communication and Decision Making in Parti Keadilan Rakyat (the People's Justice Party) of Malaysia

Gatut Priyowidodo,  
9 Department of Communication Studies,  
Petra Christian University, Surabaya, Indonesia  
email: [gatpri@petra.ac.id](mailto:gatpri@petra.ac.id)

### Abstract

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This research sets out to identify the patterns of communication and the implementation of decision making in Parti Keadilan Rakyat (the People's Justice Party) of Malaysia. This study utilized a qualitative method of inquiry, namely phenomenography with the software Nvivo as a tool for analysis to reveal the communication pattern and decision making based on findings from interviews conducted towards members in the People's Justice Party (PKR).

The research results show that the formal, i.e. upward and downward, and informal, i.e. horizontal communication, cross channel/diagonal communication and grapevine. These patterns are affected by three factors, i.e. context, as well as the experience and authority of the persons in the organization.

As a phenomenographic study, this study's limitations lie mainly in its use of interviews as means to collect data. First, it is difficult for the researchers to confirm that the information is indeed true experience. Human attitudes and actions can always be changed. Second, the researchers have limitations in accessing full information from the informants. Finally, in order not to sacrifice depth of data, informants were limitedly selected and thus cannot be claimed as representing the communication patterns implemented by everyone in the party.

**Keyword :** communication pattern, decision making, political party, organizational communication, phenomenography

### Introduction

The rationale of this research departs from the fact that a political party as an organization, is unique because it is highly dependent on the combination of the political system of a country and the role as well as perception of citizens—as a result of socio-historically formed political viewpoints.

Not every country gives freedom to their citizens to gather, to establish a group in a political organization (Werlin, 1988). The Political system in each country is incremental to allow citizens to establish political platform, especially in the form of a legally recognized organization. The more democratic a political system, the more the opportunity to organize larger and larger organization. Conversely, the more authoritarian the political system, the more limited the freedom to organize it (Held, 2006).

There are various types of organizations in the world. Aldrich & Ruef, 2006; Monge & Poole, 2008, for example, note that by size, organizations can be divided from small scale until giant ones. Further by field, organizations can also be divided into educational category, religious movements to government agencies (Castells, 2000, McKelvey, 1982, Seiller, 1982). In many countries, almost everybody has the freedom to form organizations, the way to join in or have an ally with others. All depend on the missions, objectives, structures and procedures for the workings of the organization (Schein, 1997).

However, for a political organization the freedom to establish an organization is not always free of obstacles. It does not imply that the organization is always independent as far as decision-making is concerned. Also, how communication is conducted among members relies heavily on the political system, conduct and culture that are in effect. People's Justice Party (PKR) of Malaysia in a case in point.

### Review of Literature

Political par 8 is considered as a formal organization. It has goals to be achieved, rule to be followed, and the status structure are consciously designed to anticipate and guide interaction and activities of member (Pace & Faules, 1994).

Based on the current development, the object of organizational communication research is not only focused on business organizations, (Jones, 2004; Abu bakar, 2007) but now have started to vary, for example, the relationship of research topics in a national and international institutional

organizations (Sand, 1998), religious organizations (Leeman, Mark A 2006), politics (Lu, Xing., 2006; Karan, 2007), a digital network (Chadwick, 2007) and even in higher education institutions (Abu Bakar, 2007).

According to Littlejohn (2005) organizational communication have been studied through two approaches. First, the traditional approach (functionalist and objectives) which emphasizes that the message handling activities are contained in an organizational boundaries (organizational boundary). Humans are viewed as information processors. The focus is to accept, interpret and act on the information in a context. The emphasis on communication is it is a tool that allows people to adapt to their environment. This approach is highly stressed in structure. Second, interaction process does not reflect the organization, it is the organization itself. Organizational communication is the organizing behavior that occur, how they are involved in the transaction process and how they give meaning to what is happening. Organizational communication is the process of creating a sense of interaction that create, maintain and change the organization. This approach is a more oriented process, that are, the process of collecting, processing, storing, and disseminating communications, that allow organizations to function

Some organizational communication researches with interpretive approaches can be read in Child (1981); Hofstede (1980); Adler (1983) about the culture, and Lu and Hebert (2006); Rori (2008) about leadership and organizational behavior (Edmondson, 2006; Leeman, 2006). The three topics of culture, leadership and organizational behavior are a very interesting research by anyone, because that is the main characteristic of each organization.

Communication pattern has two forms namely formal and informal (Byers, 1997; Pace & Faules, 2006). Formal pattern carries officially sanctioned organization that creates messages. They reflect a relationship described in the organizational personnel chart. The formal communication structure of an organization is systematically established for the transmission of message through defined relationships. It is therefore relatively predictable and stable (Byers, 1997). In contrast, the informal is situationally derived. Two types of formal communication or the directions of information flow are *downward communication* and *upward communication*. They emerge out of the immediate needs of organizational members, whether they are functional or social needs. The informal pattern of communication does not have a permanent structure.

Decision making is the process of selecting one alternative among many alternatives provided

(Miller, 1994). Decision-making in the organization, regardless of its forms, must involve all components of the organization because the decisions taken are binding rules. So the decision maker must have a precise, accurate, reliable and relevant information to define problems, generate alternatives and ultimately make choices (O'reilly, Chatman, 1987).

Further, Rowe and Boulgarides (1983) explains that the process of decision making depend on many factors including: the context in which a decision is made; the decision maker's way of perceiving and understanding cues (experience); what the decision maker values or judges as important (authority).

### Method

This study utilizes phenomenography as its main method of research. Phenomenography gives priority to interview as a means of collecting data and relies heavily on the meaning that interviewees give on the topics in question.

Phenomenography is the empirical study of a limited number of qualitatively different ways in which we experience, conceptualize, understand, perceive, and apprehend the various phenomena in aspects of the world around us. Differing to these experiences, understandings are also characterized in terms of categories of description, logically related to each other, and form hierarchies in relation to given criteria. Such an ordered set of categories of description is called the *outcome space of phenomenon* (Marton, 1994).

Total informant 10 persons. The interviews result is the primary data which will be used as material for further analysis. Before analyzing, researcher uses Nvivo software to produce categories of informant's experience.

Based on phenomenographical approach, analysis stage will be carried out by stressing on two aspects: referential aspect and the structural aspect. The referential aspect which denotes the global meaning of the object conceptualized; and the structural aspect, which shows the specific combination of features that have been discerned and focus on (Marton & Pong, 2005).

### Results and Discussion

After interviewing members of PKR both as actors within an organization as well as politicians in their own rights, the researchers were able to discover how communication patterns and decision making were implemented in the political organization. However, in order to understand the findings, there must, first be an understanding on political practices in Malaysia that impinge on the conduct of political parties as organizations.

### Communication Patterns in PKR

Since it practices parliamentary political system, Malaysia has, in tradition, relatively long term oppositions. Prior to the reformation era in the 1990s, the opposition's function had long been managed by PAS and DAP. PAS is an Islamic-wing organization of UMNO which later became independent and, since then has consistently attempted to convey Islamic rules. DAP, on the other hand, is a political association of the Chinese who has decided not to be represented by MCA, and not to submit to UMNO. The party was actually originated from a political party in Singapore.

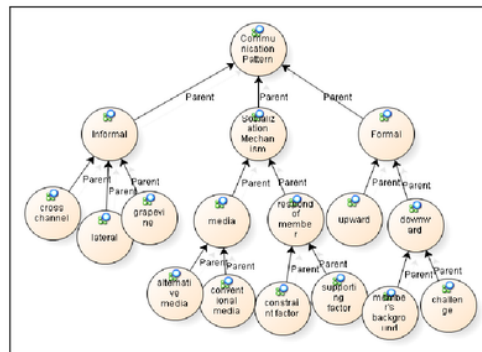
Since the commencement of the reformation in 1999, there appear another party claiming to be as multiracial party led by Datin Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who was, due to political difference, dismissed by the Head of UMNO, a position that was held by Tun Dr. Mahathir Muhammad at that time. During the imprisonment of Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the symbol of struggle was continued by his wife. The support from the public was overwhelming that the party joined the General Election XI in 2004, competing under the name Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party) which later merged with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People Party). The merged parties under their new name, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party), had successfully supported the General Leader of the party as the party managed to obtain one seat in Pematang Pauh, Pulau Pinang.

In 2004, the opposition power was not just only of two parties, but there were additional parties; PAS, DAP and PKR. These three political organizations subsequently performed the control upon every policy decided by the National Front (Barisan Nasional). Unfortunately, due to their relatively small portion of seats in the Malaysian parliament, their struggle at national level is lower than UMNO's and its alliance in National Front (Barisan Nasional). However, political constellation had changed significantly in the 10th General Election on March 8 2008, in which, for the first time in the political history of Malaysia, the opposition group had gained more than one-third of the total seats in the parliament, by as many as 222 seats where the People's Alliance had managed to gain 82 seats, divided into PKR (31), DAP (28) and PAS (23). However, after a short service, some PKR representatives resigned from the party and decided to become independent. Nevertheless, as the main supporting component of People's Alliance, PKR remained consistent in performing its oppositional duties.

Through Nvivo analysis, formal, informal communication patterns and socialization

mechanism in the People Justice Party (PKR) may be visualized in the following figures.

Figure 1:  
Communication Pattern  
of PKR by Nvivo Analysis



The experience shown by each informant basically shows two levels of communication level. The First is the communication which emphasizes on formal approach. This pattern gives more orientation that individual involved in organization activity should always perceive from organizational interest. The communication movement covers downward and upward. Both organizations run well both of these communication patterns. Informants admit that their organization is opened to accommodate aspiration from grassroots. In the contrary, at the same time, when the organization has made a policy and the members are required to follow it, then they shall comply this as logical consequence of organizational life.

However, as political organization, the aspiration of grassroots should be taken into greater consideration. It is them to choose the party. In other words, without the member, the political party will no longer exist. Thus, the existence and aspiration of member has become the most important part which reflects organization existence.

They should perceive this from greater extent of the perspective. Organizational interests should be prioritized. The experience by each informant shows that every conception is translated differently depending on the position in respective organization. The conception of communication pattern, for example, refers to the conception which is established upon three dimensions, including formal, informal and mechanism of socialization. In this second level, all informants agree that those three dimensions are the principles of communication which can be implemented in an organization.



The comparative of formal, informal communication patterns and socialization mechanism in the People Justice Party (PKR) may be visualized in the following table.

**Table 1**

The formal, informal communication patterns and socialization mechanism in PKR

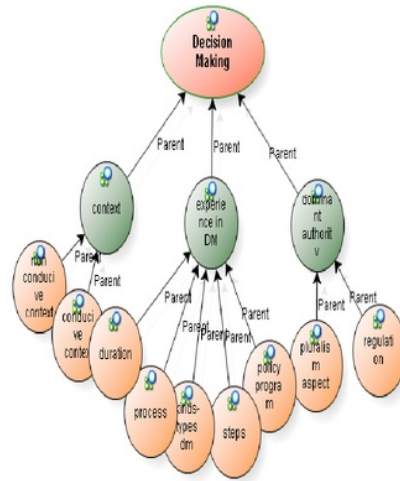
|               | Item/ Outcome Space | PKR   |
|---------------|---------------------|---|
| COMMUNICATION | Formal Upward       | Party provides the members with discretion in delivering their aspiration to the leader through official forums, conferences and congress.  |
|               | Downward            | The policy, decision and program of the party are instructed for execution to the members.  |
| PARTICIPATION | Informal Horizontal | Communication which covers topics or programs currently operated by the party is carried out among the members. Communication is carried out among them.  |
|               | Cross Channel       | Topics or policies made by the party are well communicated among the members or delivered to the committee of the party, but informal in nature.  |
|               | Grapevine           | The communication which is frequently takes place as the integral part of organizational dynamic which can not be controlled by the committee of party. The topics discussed are not based on database or empirical base. |
| SOCIALIZATION | Media               | The political party applies conventional media 'Suara Keadilan' (printed media), leaflet, pamphlets. Also alternative media, website, blog, twitter, sms, facebook  |

**Decision Making in PKR**

PKR as political organizations has three determinant factors. Those three factors include experience, dominant authority and context, all of which have been significant influencing factor in the decision making process. However, in the next level, not all dimensions are influenced by the same factor. The dominant authority factor, for example in PKR, is highly influenced by a couple of dimensions: regulation and pluralism.

Through Nvivo analysis, decision making process in the People Justice Party (PKR) may be visualized in the following figures.

**Figure 2:**  
Decision Making Process of PKR by Nvivo Analysis



Essentially, three dimensions include experience, dominant authority and context, all of which have been significant influencing factor in the decision making process. However, in the next level, not all dimensions are influenced by the same factor. The dominant authority dimension, for example in PKR, is highly influenced by a couple of dimensions: regulation and pluralism.

This fact may be expressed in two dimensions. The first dimension is plurality making element integration. The difference should not be considered an entity to be concerned, but the reinforcement in decision making process. Second, due to certain figure's strong influence to be the leader, the collision of idea will probably take place during decision making process. No one has authority to make final decision, but the leader.

Detail comparison is provided in the following table.

**Table 2**  
Decision Making Process in PKR

| Item/Out Space | PKR  |
|----------------|--|
| Experience     | All informants have long experience, based on the involvement in political party of origin, such as UMNO, PAS, Socialists, or NGO. |
| Process        | The decision made is based   |

|                    |                  |  |
|--------------------|------------------|--|
|                    |                  | on the process and mechanism of the party. If not, the mechanism is performed through conference.                                |
|                    | Steps            | Begins with MPP, MPN, MPC, MPK.  |
|                    | Types            | Decision by MPP, MPN, MPC and also adjudicative decision.  |
|                    | Policy Program   | Kafalah RMY program of 500/person, education, health, community development.   |
| Dominant Authority | Regulation       | In accordance with the rules. The decision made should be reformed. If not included into the rules, conference shall be applied. |
|                    | Pluralism Aspect | Difference of insight, interest, ethnic, nation.   |
| Context            | Conducive        | In Kedah, it obtains strong support as it governs with PAS. Grassroot gives strong support.                                      |
|                    | Non Conducive    | Inadequate media support for socialization, improvement in members' knowledge.   |

The decision making process is the manifestation of democratic practice. Therefore, every political organization should have certain mechanism in such activity. In principal, the decision making process shall always be related to three concerns. The first is their experience in decision making involvement. The second is to define the party who has dominant authority in decision making, and finally, the context of decision making.

On top of that, those three principles may not stand alone. There are at least two or more factors which can support the generation of each principle. Each element shall be explored as the supporting conception of the three aforementioned conceptions.

The experience factor in tree nodes is described within five free nodes: duration, process, steps, kinds/types, and policy program. The experience of each informant shows different variations. But, they have similarity concerning each conception which will be explored (the referential aspect). They (informants of PKR) argue that their experience is the determining factor in decision making process.

The longer they are active in the organization, the more adequate experience they have in providing the basis of thought in decision making process. This fact is greatly important as

any political organization will always have different steps and level in the commission. It implies that if the committee in every level is perceived to have minimum capability, of course this will bring impact on the quality of decision making.

Such quality is closely related to the type and policy program taken (the structural aspect). Each has different emphasis. In the level of MPP (*Majelis Pengerusi Pusat/* Central Executive Board) for example, it is clear that the decision making is higher if compared with MPN (*Majelis Pengerusi Negeri/* Regional Executive Board). MPN merely views in the regional level; meanwhile MPP takes into consideration for the interest of branch.

For example, *Kafalah* is the program which provides financial support to the poor whose one of the family members is dead. In this case, all poor are treated similarly, whether they are from India, Chinese Malay, or Thailand.

In particular, the decision making process on who is proposed as candidate of executive councilor (PKR-Kedah) also takes many aspects into consideration. Furthermore, for the candidate of *Menteri Besar/governor*, in addition to personal criteria with good capability, their performance to their party is also taken into account. In this matter of case, it is obviously clear there is connection between the personal quality (relative-subjective) and organization (objective). Final decision made shall pass many steps in the environment of internal organization.

The very fundamental problem in organization of political party, particularly PKR is minimum function and organizational structure. Wherever it is, the regulation shall be defined as the rules for working guideline for an organization (the referential aspect). However, actuating the rules is not as simple as writing.

Moreover if the political party is always monitored by public figures, then the organization will tend to ignore the given regulation. However, what happens in PKR is quite exceptional. As political organization, PKR has made comprehensive effort in enacting the rules of organization. Anwar Ibrahim is considered the uniting symbol.

Pluralism is an icon which is always shown by PKR to attract public sympathy. This also calls to mind that multiracial Malaysian citizens may be united in a single party. And finally, all of its interest may be attained within the association.

## Conclusion

By applying phenomenography, the researcher not only manage to discover the patterns of communication and decision making

but also able to find what underlies or what determines those patterns.

First, the communication patterns in the People's Justice Party consists of both formal and informal communication patterns, namely upward and downward communication patterns. Informal patterns included horizontal communication, cross channel/diagonal communication and grapevine communication.

The patterns of communication and process of decision making are determined by three factors context, experience and authority.

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