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Pas' Gombak ceramah a display of political intrigue

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TEEMING crowd, roaring sale of political cassettes, and reverberating chants of Allah is Great - Pas's Markaz Tarbiyah in Gombak on Sunday night had all the makings of a major Pas ceramah. The Markaz is where the party headquarters is.

Yet, the best-seller among the cassettes was the recording of the sometimes hoarse voice of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the sacked Deputy Prime Minister and former deputy president of Umno.

And, there were motley groups of non-Muslims who could be supporters of the ubiquitous non-governmental groups - 11 of which last week joined Pas, DAP and Parti Rakyat Malaysia to quickly form the Malaysian People's Justice Movement or Gerak.

The slight variation in the character of the ceramah was because Gerak had stirred into action that night for its first gathering, making "defending justice" a rallying cry and demanding an end to the Internal Security Act.

The excitement and the sense of anticipation at the modest Markaz hall were palpable from the outset.

The mood soared when Mahfuz Omar, Pas' deputy Youth leader, told the gathering that Anwar's wife, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, had sent their eldest daughter to read her speech. But word had it that she had to turn back, unable to find her way in through the crowd.

At one point, sighs and murmurs gave way to chuckles when Pas vice-president Mustaffa Ali told the crowd of how a senior police officer had wanted to address the gathering.

"I advised them not to. It is better for me to convey the message," he said, and after some witty description of the conversation, and much laughter, added: "The message is to tell you that this gathering is tidak sah (illegal)."

That this was a different crowd from the youthful supporters of Anwar's reformasi was proven when Mustaffa's call for the crowd not to taunt the police officers leaving the place was adhered to.

Apart from responding to cries of Allahu Akbar, and rapturous responses to speeches they enjoyed, there were no nasty chants.

The truth is the Pas crowd is used to fiery speeches like those given by popular speaker Muhammad Sabu, MP for Nilam Puri.

On Sunday night, Gerak also attracted a posse of foreign journalists, eager for another cry of "reformasi" and stinging indictment of the Government.

Yet, all these journalists could understand of the proceedings were cries of Allahu Akbar, and familiar names of "Dr Mahathir" and "Anwar" as they were entirely conducted in Bahasa Malaysia.

Some of the foreign journalists must have been wondering why the name "Anwar" was only sparingly mentioned. They heard "Dr Mahathir" more.

The fact is they had just witnessed a display of political intrigue. Gerak sprang up in the wake of the sacking of Anwar from Cabinet and Umno.

Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor who heads Gerak and was a close ally of Anwar in their Abim days, was one of the few who actually mentioned Anwar's name.

It was telling that Fadzil told reporters afterwards: "We are not aligned to the reform movement ... we don't go to the streets."

Was Fadzil deliberately distancing Gerak from Anwar and his "reformasi"

movement out of fear that allegations against Anwar might be proven true?

Or are Pas and its collaborators trying to hide support for Anwar or at the very least "qualify" their support for him?

Going by the delicate manner in which Pas is handling the Anwar issue one does get the impression that Pas could still be supporting Anwar. But it does not want to be open about it fearing that the charges against Anwar could be proven true.

On the other hand, the formation of Gerak might very well be Pas' answer to the Gerakan Reformasi.

Pas, which enjoys support and sympathy from a section of Abim members could not afford to lose their support, should the reform movement continues.

Seen in this light, the Gerak movement will be an attempt by Pas to convince its Abim supporters that it, too, has an agenda for change.

At the same time, Pas could also be forming the movement to gain the support of NGOs, which are now supporting Anwar. The list of signatories suggests that they are the same NGOs supporting the reform movement.

Some observers felt that the absence of Kelantan Menteri Besar Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat from Sunday night's gathering was telling. Especially when, Nik Aziz has been ambivalent on the Anwar situation while Fadzil had been open in his support for Anwar.

Fadzil's affinity with Anwar is understandable. They were both leaders of Abim. A former Abim leader once said that he was at a meeting back in the 1970s when Anwar and Fadzil argued eloquently why the other should be president of Abim when the post became vacant.

"In the end Fadzil told Anwar, 'People want to listen to your speeches, not mine'."

And they remained on good terms, despite being on opposite sides of the political divide since Anwar joined Umno in 1982.

Still, the development surrounding Gerak and Gerakan Reformasi gives rise to speculations. Foremost is "Is what Gerak is doing akin to the Malay saying of "menanggung di air keruh" of trying to benefit from Anwar's misfortune?"

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