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Youth chief must make stand clear as to where his loyalties lie

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FOR many Umno members, reading "signs" is a necessary skill. For the party leaders, reading "signs" is essential. For Umno Youth leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, reading today's "signs" can mean continuity at the helm of the movement, or removal.

Many of his exco members have demanded that Umno Youth make known its stand on the supreme council's decision to expel former deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as an Umno member.

On Tuesday, 21 of 25 Youth Exco members, after a futile five-day wait for Zahid to call for a meeting to discuss the expulsion, decided to take things into their own hands and pledged support for the decisions taken by the Prime Minister and the council.

Zahid had a few days earlier committed the Barisan Nasional Youth to support Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, but the Youth movement he led has yet to announce its stand.

And this has led the majority of Youth Exco members to come to Tuesday's decision.

Zahid may be a friend or even an adviser to Anwar, but this does not necessarily make Umno Youth part of the support to the former deputy president.

Zahid has argued that he was present at Anwar's residence in his personal capacity to show sympathy to the latter's family. But how is it possible for Zahid to go to Anwar's residence, deliver fiery speeches in support of reforms in the country, and then claim that he did not do it in his capacity as Umno Youth chief?

Can Zahid as a politician elected under the Barisan Nasional ticket make speeches in support of Anwar, who is now an Independent MP, and then choose to pledge loyalty to Umno and Dr Mahathir?

How does one draw the line between one's personal and political life? Zahid must realise that he is not Umno Youth, and Umno Youth is not him.

Zahid, as a member of the supreme council, also voted in favour of Anwar's expulsion from Umno at last week's meeting which decided by consensus.

Dr Mahathir, when briefing reporters after the council meeting, said he had asked members to decide by consensus whether or not to expel Anwar.

Consensus means that each and every member had the power of veto. And if any member of the council had felt that Anwar should not be expelled from the party, the member could have vetoed it.

However, the council members including Zahid, decided unanimously to vote for Anwar's expulsion. The council members were also given an option of voting by a show of hands or by secret ballots. They chose the former.

The question now is whether Zahid had voted sincerely or had done so for his personal political survival? To date, Umno Youth members are still in the dark as to which side Zahid is on, although the signs seem to show that Zahid is not averse to showing his support to Anwar.

Some Umno insiders say that this could lead to a split in the movement, if it has not already. They may even question his leadership and loyalty.

Zahid in a speech delivered at Anwar's house after the latter was sacked said he would take over the reform movement if Anwar was arrested and charged.

But what kind of reforms is Zahid actually seeking? Zahid took over the Youth leadership after defeating incumbent Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik and

Rural Development Minister Datuk Annuar Musa by a mere 64-vote majority.

Zahid garnered 199 votes while Annuar, his closest challenger obtained 135.

Immediately after his victory, the Youth, under Zahid's new leadership, decided to go on the theme Pemuda Pemangkin Gerakan Reformasi (Youth - the Catalyst for Reforms).

But after two years of his leadership, the movement remains as it was two years ago. There is nothing glaringly different from the movement led by Rahim or even his predecessor, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

One would have expected Zahid to have reformed the movement, but it seems that the opposite has happened. A majority of exco members have taken things into their own hands on the issue of Anwar's expulsion.

Against this backdrop, today's Youth Exco meeting will be important. Zahid will be compelled to make known his stand on Anwar's expulsion.

Whether this will be accepted by his colleagues and whether the same kind of laughter that one hears filtering out of the meeting room each time the Youth Exco meets will be heard again today, is uncertain.

Unless Zahid makes clear his position on the case, he may run the risk of his Exco members questioning his leadership. Some members are already showing signs of distancing themselves from Zahid.

If he does not move now, he may get the Youth Exco moving for a vote of no confidence against his leadership. And having secured only a narrow win in the 1996 party elections, Zahid knows that there is no shortage of candidates to take over.

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