

07/11/1999

Assessing Anwar's chances as PM

Joceline Tan

ABOUT a fortnight ago, two political figures found themselves seated side-by-side on a MAS flight to Kota Baru.

One of them was an Umno Youth politician from Kelantan heading back to his division, the other was a top Parti Keadilan Nasional figure from Kuala Lumpur on the way to Kelantan for a ceramah.

They were actually quite pleased to find themselves in each other's company for they had got along well when both were in Umno.

The Keadilan chap wanted to know when the Prime Minister would call for general election. His side, he said, was getting more and more worn out by the week.

The Umno man told him frankly that Umno had been on the alert after the cry-wolf nature of the arsenic-poisoning incident.

Umno had learnt an important lesson from the issue and that was, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim will try anything to sway public sentiment to his favour.

As the Umno politician put it: "Imagine the election campaign is in full swing and Anwar emerges from court with 'blood' on his face; later, an investigation establishes that the 'blood' is tomato ketchup. By then, it will be too late for us."

Both of them had burst out laughing at this although the Keadilan politician later brushed it off as "a wicked thing to say".

But Umno circles are on the alert against Anwar pulling off another political stunt. They think the arsenic ruse was targeted as much at the Apec meeting then on in Auckland, as it was at what Anwar thought would be general election in November.

"I don't discount something along this line during the election," says think-tank head Razak Baginda.

Even the Barisan Alternatif's (the coalition of Pas, Keadilan, DAP and PRM) nomination of Anwar as its Prime Minister is seen as yet another election-oriented stunt.

"It's pushing him as PM to win votes, just as it has been using him all these months to get popular," says Umno Youth Exco member Datuk Abdul Aziz Sheikh Fadzir.

Others say it's to make the opposition coalition more palatable to voters.

"The opposition is definitely Pas-led and that needs to be balanced by personalities from among non-Pas politicians ... it's got to be a Malay and that's Anwar Ibrahim," says a Malay lawyer.

Opposition figures do not deny that. They say few issues have stirred public opinion the way Anwar's sacking and trial has and that Anwar, from day one, has been central to the opposition.

"He is the acknowledged leader among the opposition leaders," says Keadilan Youth head Mohd Ezam Mohd Nor.

Moreover, says Pas vice-president Mustafa Ali, Anwar has the most experience in governance among them, having been a Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and even Acting Prime Minister.

The Barisan Alternatif's announcement of Anwar for PM at the tail-end of the arsenic issue also invited speculation that it was an attempt at damage control.

But DAP chairman Dr Chen Man Hin explains it this way: People had been asking who would be the leader of the opposition coalition, whether it

would be someone from Pas or Anwar. And there had also been lots of rumours about a power tussle between Pas and Keadilan. Hence the need to settle the leadership question.

"Things have become more focused since," says the DAP veteran.

But can Anwar, realistically speaking, become Prime Minister of the Barisan Alternatif?

First, there is the question of whether Anwar can contest the election.

"If he runs, anything is possible after that," says Mohd Ezam.

The Federal Constitution allows an MP convicted in a court of law to continue as an MP until he has exhausted all avenues of appeal. This was the case for Kota Melaka MP Lim Guan Eng and Anwar is being accorded the same treatment now.

However, Article 46(5) of the Constitution stipulates an immediate disqualification from nomination, election or appointment to either House of Parliament even though an appeal may be in progress.

But this, as Umno's Datuk Dr Rais Yatim points out, has never been legally challenged although he thinks the prospects "are slim given the constitutional reality".

(There have been two remotely-connected precedents: DAP MPs Chian Heng Kai and Chan Kok Kit contested and won the Batu Gajah and Sungei Besi seats respectively in the 1978 general election while detained under the Internal Security Act.)

Thus, based on the common law precept that one is presumed innocent till all avenues of appeal are exhausted, Anwar's lawyers would probably try to test it in court.

The second and more daunting hurdle for the opposition is, of course, to win the general election and, based on this point alone, Umno people have not even bothered to discuss the prospects of Anwar as PM.

The BN is supremely confident of staying in power. The last six months have seen the ruling coalition regain confidence and the question now is whether it can retain the two-thirds majority it has enjoyed since 1974.

Says Abdul Aziz: "I have been talking to a lot of people. People with common sense, who want development, they are not ready to chuck the Government.

"But at the same time, they want more space to voice their views, a little more check and balance. They are not happy about certain things, about one or two people, but they don't want to sacrifice what they have."

Ironically, DAP members share more or less the same view. The question of Anwar as PM is largely theoretical for a large number of them because they are not even confident of denting the BN's two-thirds majority.

But Malay parties in the Barisan Alternatif are aware of the Malay psychology on politics and power; they know that Malays, having experienced power since Independence, are not keen to back parties which they think have no chance of winning.

Neither does the idea of being a strong opposition appeal to them. Hence, the Malay segment among the opposition has no choice but to take the line of toppling the BN.

But even assuming that Anwar is allowed to contest the general election and the Barisan Alternatif forms the next Government, there is still a third hurdle - Anwar's six-year jail sentence beginning from April this year.

Pas' Mustafa says the opposition coalition intends to open a judicial inquiry into what it maintains is the political conspiracy that led to Anwar's present predicament.

"We have agreed among ourselves that whichever party wins the most seats will get to be the interim Prime Minister until Anwar is ready to take over. For Pas, it will be (Datuk) Fadzil Noor," says Mustafa.