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Can Dr Wan Azizah serve up a potent political brew?

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THE tudung-clad Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail is probably by now one of the most recognisable faces in the international media.

The 46-year-old wife of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and president of the new Parti Keadilan Nasional is much sought-after for interviews.

She is on the cover on the latest issue of Newsweek and was on CNN in "Q&A with Riz Khan" earlier this week. And for several months now, not an issue of Harakah goes by without some quote from or mention of her.

She is a regular on the Pas ceramah circuit where she is a refreshing sight in her pastel tudung and floral-patterned baju kurung among the drab and bearded male Pas speakers.

Dr Wan Azizah cuts an unlikely figure in Malaysian politics. For a start, there are so few Malay women in the rough-and-tumble field of opposition politics.

And as those who have heard her at ceramah or even on CNN would have noticed, she is very much a political novice; she has a girlish voice and is hesitant about issues. But despite her limited speaking skills and grasp of issues, she has been drawing crowds on the scale of some of Pas' most prominent speakers.

A high-profile political career was probably furthest from her mind up till half a year ago and it is said that had it not been for the circumstances, this British-trained ophthalmologist would have been quite contented to remain a political wife and mother of six children.

Newsweek might have sensed this for its cover picture of her showed a pensive-looking Dr Wan Azizah, half her face suffused with pale, golden light and the other half in the shadows.

She says she is doing this in the name of justice and democracy but many think she has taken this forward role because she is a strong woman out to defend the honour of her family.

Others say her action is typical of the Malay-Muslim woman who thinks she has to be obedient to her husband's word.

Whatever the reasons, Dr Wan Azizah probably had the first real taste of what is involved in being the political leader of a party when the street protests against the guilty verdict on her husband turned aggressive.

Despite Dr Wan Azizah's denial of Keadilan's involvement, several days before the verdict, pro-Anwar websites had called for a show of numbers among supporters while others pamphleteered the same message in parts of the city.

The organisers - they are the ones who distribute printed posters, T-shirts, signboards and party flags at marches - must have thought it would turn out like another of their regular Saturday protests.

Instead, the protests escalated into violence, with public property damaged, bonfires and media vehicles wrecked and before the day was out, both sides were blaming each other.

The Keadilan president accused the police of inciting the violence and the ruling party blamed Keadilan and Pas for not being able to control their youthful supporters.

True supporters of the party, Dr Wan Azizah was quoted as saying, would not damage the party's reputation.

By the weekend, both Keadilan and Pas had disassociated themselves from the fiasco, with the latest issue of Harakah laying the blame squarely on agents provocateurs.

Says Pas' Dr Hatta Ramli: "Just because they carry a Pas sign and flag does not mean they are our members."

Many ordinary people do not find the suggestions of instigation and agents provocateurs implausible especially after the infamous incident in Kampung Baru which saw a "reformasi supporter" suddenly whip out his pistol when confronted by the crowd; he was actually a Special Branch officer.

At the same time, they find it hard to completely absolve Keadilan and Pas supporters from the vandalism, particularly given the dramatic images in both the local and foreign media.

"When things are okay, they are your supporters. When things go wrong, you wash your hands (of them)," says Wanita Umno's Rosnah Majid.

Even as the blaming game continues, Pas figures like Hatta insist the episode has not affected the opposition cause, that it's "just a small milestone in our fight for justice".

Rosnah begs to differ: "It's irresponsible. Violence puts people off."

Scenes of protesters throwing stones and burning dustbins, she adds, do not go down well with ordinary Malaysians.

To add to that, the extremely young faces among the protesters do not enhance Keadilan's aim to be a serious party, with the clout to lead the different opposition parties into the next general election and to form the next Government.

In this context, Dr Wan Azizah's political inexperience shows through; on the second day of the street protests last week, a foreign news agency quoted her as condemning the violence but urging the demonstrators to press ahead.

It was an extremely ill-advised move for, by then, anyone could see that both Keadilan and Pas had lost control of the situation. The best thing to do then - and especially since they believed that outsiders were manipulating things - would have been to call their supporters off the streets rather than urge them on.

Still, DAP's Teresa Kok says Dr Wan Azizah is learning fast.

"She's improved so much so quickly. Don't forget, she has to tackle the system, and, at the same time, conform to the Islamic group," Kok says.

But will she learn fast enough to be able to forge what she calls "the bridge" for the opposition forces to work together?

"Running a political party is not easy. This is politics in the raw," says veteran journalist Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail.

"It's going to be difficult," adds political scientist Dr Hussein Mohamed.

Like many academicians, Hussein was incensed when it was revealed that Anwar had been beaten up while in police custody.

Since then, he has cooled down considerably and admits quite candidly now: "This aim of theirs to replace the Government ... it's too much to swallow. It will be tough even to break the (BN's) two-thirds majority."

He points to the Umno machinery and war chest which none of the opposition parties - except perhaps Pas - can hope to match, and the fact that Umno as a party is still relevant to the Malays although they may be unhappy with some of the leaders.

And while many can relate to key issues being aired by the opposition - a more professional police force, restoring confidence in the judicial system and greater accountability in political life - these issues alone may be insufficient in pushing them to opt for complete change.

Says Samad: "They say people want change, but they don't spell out the alternative. People look at Indonesia and ask whether the next person can hold things together. Frankly, I don't think the opposition has really worked out what it wants apart from toppling the Government."

"People will want to know in detail what comes next before they give up what they have now," says Tang Ah Chai, Youth head of the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall.

In other words, the voting population is unlikely to cast their votes to the opposition simply on the basis of the broad notion of a more just and democratic Government.

Dr Wan Azizah's situation has also been compared to Cory Aquino of the Philippines in the sense that if Aquino can do it, so can Dr Wan Azizah.

But as a Malay lawyer points out, Aquino became President in a political system very different from the Westminster system practised here.

For any party or coalition to taste power here, they will have to position credible candidates across the nation and that is where small parties like Keadilan which have yet to develop the local network may run into problems.

The party enjoys sympathy on the ground and is said to be processing some 3,000 membership applications, but the majority of Keadilan's office-bearers do not have a background of political experience or grassroots connections. Like many non-governmental organisations, the Keadilan organisation does not extend beyond the office-bearers, for now.

Its most outstanding office-holders come from the NGOs: deputy president Dr Chandra Muzaffar is president of Just World Trust; vice-president Tian Chua is a social activist linked to Suaram; and secretary-general Mohd Anuar Tahir is associated with the Centre for Peace and a former Abim leader.

Neither are Youth leader Mohd Ezam M. Nor nor Wanita leader Nell Onn known for their dynamism or organising ability.

In fact, those acquainted with the elderly Nell - she is the sister of the late Tun Hussein Onn - say she is "the sweetest, old lady" they know, but "a politician she's not". They also say that Nell's primary reason for joining Keadilan is her dislike for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

One other figure who stands out is former Umno Youth secretary Saifuddin Nasution, well-known for his organising acumen and oratory.

The irony is that he was the one who led a group of Barisan Nasional Youth members in disrupting a seminar on East Timor and which resulted in people like Chua being arrested and detained. But as they say, that's politics, and the two are now on the same side.

And despite Keadilan's avowed claims to justice, friends of Chua were disappointed that no Keadilan people were to be seen at the vigil for Chua outside the police station where he was detained.

"He's the party vice-president and he took risks for the party," says one of those at the vigil.

DAP is said to favour Keadilan taking a leading role in an opposition pact this general election but it is difficult to see a big boy like Pas consenting to playing second fiddle.

Publicly, Pas people talk about the importance of Keadilan in appealing to the "middle ground" but in private they make no bones about the fact that Keadilan needs them more than they need Keadilan.

Dr Wan Azizah may draw the crowds at a Pas ceramah, but the ceramah is still essentially a Pas affair.

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