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Keadilan should reconsider its agenda in the interest of survival

Rosihan Zain

AN amusing one-liner frequently heard in the weeks leading up to the last general election, went like this: Umno Untuk Semua; Keadilan Untuk Seorang Sahaja.

But amusement aside, the question of what Parti Keadilan Nasional really stands for, how far it has come and where it is heading begs an answer as the party celebrates its first year of existence.

The past one year has seen the party becoming known more for street protests and demonstrations than anything else. The impression given is that this is the party's way to keep its profile high.

Administration in the party under secretary-general Annuar Tahir is also said to have been inadequately handled.

Keadilan leaders have boasted in the past of the way the party was inundated by membership applications but sources say there are at most only about 30,000 card-carrying members.

And to date, the actual structure of the number of divisions nationwide remains unclear. This state of affairs is understandably attributed to the secretary-general.

Another issue is the pending merger with Parti Rakyat Malaysia. The merger has general support although there is opposition from one or two party figures in Keadilan who have cited reasons such as PRM's socialist history and a potential loss of Malay support for Keadilan if the merger takes place.

Then there is the fear and resentment felt by members of the two parties towards each other. According to a PRM supporter, the difference in working culture between the two parties was clearly seen during the last general election.

"Some of the Keadilan people carried themselves like the Umno bosses they once were which is not how we do things in PRM," she said.

The Keadilan leadership also has to deal with the assortment of camps in the party: ex-Umno, ex-Semangat 46, Abim boys, NGO officials-turned-politicians and the ragtag band of people who are in it because of their dislike for one person; Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

There is also the question of who is really leading Keadilan. Some think the real leader is Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim but a leader cannot conduct party affairs from behind bars.

And while president Datin Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail is very popular in the party, it is said she has not been able to provide the strong cohesive leadership required of a fledgling party like Keadilan.

The realities and challenges of running a political party are probably sinking in now - holding the diverse groups of supporters together, running the party headquarters, paying the bills, organising activities and setting policies.

Dr Chandra Muzaffar, on the other hand, seems more hands-on as a leader but it is no secret that he has grown increasingly unpopular within the party for his approach and style of making decisions.

There have also been reports of clashes between him and other party figures although Youth leader Mohd Ezam Mohd Nor insisted that differences exist in every party and that the "situation in Keadilan was manageable".

Another party leader, Tian Chua, once counted on to garner Chinese support, seems to have been less than successful in this task. But he has strong links with the NGOs and his presence at demonstrations has drawn a

lot of attention to him.

There is also the bigger issue of multi-racialism that the party claims to stand for. The party has yet to prove its multi-racial appeal to the public and in most eyes, it seems to be a Malay-dominated party.

This begs parallels with the multi-racial Parti Negara, founded in 1954 by Datuk Onn Jaafar.

While Parti Negara failed to secure any seats in the 1955 elections, Keadilan in the last general election got a handful of seats.

But even Onn's legendary stature could not prevent the demise of Parti Negara. History remains the best guide in times of uncertainty and Keadilan ought to realise that a political party needs more than just emotional support to survive.

Thus, on its first anniversary, Keadilan should perhaps reconsider its agenda of demonstrations and reflect on history, lest the party itself prematurely becomes history.

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