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Keadilan in battle of wills

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DR Chandra Muzaffar has accused Parti Keadilan Nasional vice-president Azmin Ali of telling preposterous lies.

The outburst came after Azmin said Chandra left Keadilan because his views and comments were not welcomed by party members.

Both remarks, from Chandra and Azmin, were scathing and full of venom.

The disaffection between former colleagues fighting on a common platform for a common political cause is not something new or surprising.

In fact, Keadilan was the spawn of such a break-up - when Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad sacked his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

In retrospect, the fallout between Dr Mahathir and Anwar was the local political event of the decade.

It led to the great Malay divide with all opposition parties in the country coming together to ride on the Anwar issue which, at that time, promised great political gains.

Today, one of the main passengers on the Anwar ride, the DAP, has decided to go its own way because of its discomfort with the other passenger, Pas, over its insistence on setting up an Islamic state. Pas, the main beneficiary of the ride, has managed to fortify its gains.

Keadilan, which was in the driver's seat, seems to have lost its sense of direction and has been reduced to being merely a driver who does not own the vehicle.

All this occurred within a period of less than three years from the November 1999 general election.

During that election, though Pas was the most organised and powerful in terms of grassroots support, it was Keadilan that was getting all the attention.

It had Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail as president, Chandra as deputy and well-known lawyer Zainur Zakaria and outspoken politician who-had-done-her-rounds Marina Yusoff as its vice-presidents.

Today, Dr Wan Azizah remains in her post but Chandra and Marina have quit the party altogether.

Zainur, too, quit but remains an ordinary member.

Marina, when she decided to call it quits, made numerous accusations against Chandra, describing him as high-handed and opinionated.

Now, Chandra, after quitting, said he was disillusioned with Anwar.

In accusing Azmin of preposterous lying, Chandra said dishonesty of this sort mirrored the ease with which certain Keadilan leaders lied, distorted and deceived the people, and it had convinced him that his decision to quit the party was the right one.

He went on to say if his reasons for quitting were made known to the public, it would make a mockery of Keadilan's rhetoric of being the "harbinger of new politics".

The crunch was his remarks that Keadilan is a party where the end justifies the means.

All this said by Chandra, if true, should be enough to make anyone who used to believe that Keadilan was the alternative to the existing establishment to review their perception.

If all this is not enough, based on what Chandra has said, there is more which he is not telling. If he does, based on his assessments, they will make a mockery of Keadilan's rhetoric of being the forerunner for a new political culture in the country.

There are numerous connotations and perceptions which come along from what Chandra had said.

Before going any further, there are several premises that need to be established.

First, how much of what Chandra said can be accepted by the general populace and Keadilan members as true?

When Chandra decided to join Keadilan, many apolitical members of the citizenry saw him as giving legitimacy to the party and the Anwar cause.

In fact, quite a number of students viewed him as the icing to the reformasi cake.

Chandra does carry that weight. It is because he is a renowned social activist, an intellectual and one with a certain degree of moral standing.

Other Keadilan leaders were known to have used Chandra to justify the existence of their party.

Their arguments were simple: "If a person like Chandra, who is a well-known intellectual, can believe in our cause, why can't the rest of the nation?"

Even then, despite attempts to discredit Chandra, not many people from Umno or the other Barisan Nasional component parties dared to publicly run him down, purely because of his standing in the eyes of society.

This, no doubt convinced the politically naive and the many Johnnies-who-came-lately into Malaysian politics.

The next question is, now that Chandra is no longer in Keadilan and has started to expose the party's shortcomings albeit in small doses, will those who believe in Keadilan because of him, change their mind?

Here, there are several types of supporters of political parties or movements.

The first are those suffering from the herd mentality, blindly following the crowd they keep to or live with.

Together with this group are those who, in their ignorance, are truly convinced that their cause is right and noble.

The next are those who are critical and assess each and every party and issue seriously before making a stand.

The third are those who will join any party as long as it opposes the other party that they hate for whatever reasons.

There is a fourth - those who are opportunists and will support any political party for as long as they see they can gain something out of it. But such kind are usually in the ruling parties.

But this type can also end up setting up new political parties or joining the opposition because they discover the pipeline is off limits to them.

Quite a number of them are definitely in Keadilan.

Some returned to Umno when they saw an opening while the rest remained in Keadilan, hoping to gather ample political clout to either replace Umno or to bargain their return to Umno's fold.

It is those suffering from herd mentality, ignorant believers and the critical-minded ones that will be affected by the development in Keadilan.

The revelations from the likes of Chandra may affect the herd leader and it is possible the whole herd which believed in him may now decide to throw their lot back with Umno or get out of Keadilan altogether.

Those who believe that their intentions are noble and right may find it difficult to swallow what Chandra said and may turn to the other for guidance.

The critical-minded ones are fine as they will make their assessments and evaluate whether Chandra is right or merely another one of those frustrated politician-wannabes.

The third type will not change their mind, may even try to discredit

Chandra and will join forces with the opportunists who have yet to see an opportunity to change their stripes.

Then, the battle of wills shall determine whether Chandra or his detractors in Keadilan will gain the upper hand in shaping the perception of other members and the public as to where Keadilan stands.

In actual fact, what is going on in Keadilan is an extension of an earlier battle between Umno and Keadilan as a whole.

Then, Chandra and present and potential future detractors in Keadilan were together in the effort to prove that Umno was not to be trusted and should be denounced by not only the Malays but the rest of the nation.

Umno was badly affected by these efforts. Keadilan gained a little bit of ground while Pas, as earlier pointed out, took the lion's share of the largesse.

Now, the battle is brought to a lesser front but the outcome will have a spillover and undo much of the damage Keadilan inflicted on Umno previously.

This is especially true when Chandra has publicly labelled some of the Keadilan leaders as being dishonest.

In the end, as the popular conclusion on politics goes - it is the people who are going to be the judge of all these developments.

However, under the circumstances, surely, "liar, liar, a political party on fire", is equally apt.

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