

Anwar in quandary over Baru Bian's post
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PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim is being subjected to a "fierce SMS campaign" urging him to remove national PKR vice-president Baru Bian as state party chief, according to sources close to the party.

Over the past week, there has been intense lobbying for Granda Aing, state PKR vice-chairman, to replace Baru Bian, a well-known land rights lawyer, as Sarawak PKR chief.

Having helmed the Sarawak PKR liaison committee for a little over a year, Baru Bian (left) has a number of party rivals working against him despite making some headway in the campaign against the ruling BN coalition.

"Within the short period of time, Baru has raised the standard on the challenge mounted against the state BN," said a political scientist who follows Sarawak politics closely.

"No wonder the Sarawak chief minister, and BN at the national level, are working even harder in their desperate attempt to retain Sarawak in the upcoming state election."

According to a party leader, the PKR political bureau met last night ostensibly to confirm Baru Bian as state PKR chief, but the SMS drive appears to have thrown the appointment into doubt. There will be another meeting tomorrow.

"It seems like Anwar is still in two minds," said the political observer.

"Anwar's main political weakness is that he is still living in the old PKR trying to be inclusive in the appointment of leaders and selection of candidates," he said, referring to how the relatively unknown Granda Aing is even being considered.

"Anwar has obviously not learned to accept the ground realities."

The two leaders in Sarawak PKR have separate approaches to state politics.

Baru Bian has put emphasis on the native customary rights (NCR) to land and linking such rights to the broader rights of Sarawakians, a pressing issue among all ethnic groups: Dayak, Malay and Chinese.

He has also won several celebrated court cases on behalf of rural NCR landowners against the state government and its favoured logging and oil palm plantation companies.

"Baru Bian has the image of not just being a humble man and a justice-minded politician but his integrity has broad base appeal among the public."

The political observer was referring to Baru's high-profile land rights cases which cut across racial boundaries, including a landmark victory for Mohd Rambli Kawi, whose Malay land rights were also illegally infringed by the state BN government.

Granda lacks public appeal

Meanwhile, Granda, a Bidayuh from Bau, has spoken out strongly for his own community, but he does not have the same public appeal throughout the state.

He had weighted into an internal BN debate over the non-appointment of Bidayuh as chairman of the Padawan Municipal Council, without realising that he was drawn into the divisive polemic of racial politics.

"Coming from a PKR vice-chairman, a party professing to be non-racial, it just shows how BN-type of people are very much alive and kicking in PKR," observed a Sarawakian blogger who criticised Granda in the popular Sarawak blog 'Hornbill Unleashed'.

"If Anwar picks Granda over Baru, then Anwar is doomed to repeat his destructive path and Sarawak will continue to be under the corrupt BN for another 50 years," said the blogger.

"Baru is the obvious leader to take on Sarawak's ruling BN," said the political analyst.

"He has spearheaded a PKR campaign that gained much momentum in Sarawak, especially by making use of all alternative information to great effect, such as the Sarawak Report and Radio Free Sarawak, which have disseminated reports of alleged wealth and land grabs by Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud."

The PKR under Baru Bian has overseen the distribution of tens of thousands of pamphlets and VCDs containing information from the Sarawak Report, which have made the BN extremely edgy, as attested to by yesterday's arrests of Dayak activists in possession of these compact discs.

"The BN has reacted in a big way, and I dare say the spread of information has thrown Taib's leadership into doubt, with reports of (premier) Najib Razak wanting Taib to step down," the political observer said.

"Baru's public record over the last two decades has gained him many friends, locally and abroad, and from non-partisan Sarawakian groups who have now turned Pakatan-friendly," he said.

"The fact that Anwar's choice of leader can determine how Sarawak will perform in the upcoming state election speaks volume of the sense of helplessness that Sarawakians must feel, especially after almost 50 years of BN."