

Rafizi Ramli - from PKR critic to reluctant politician
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INTERVIEW PKR director of strategy Rafizi Ramli was fasting the day he came into Malaysiakini's studio last week.

"I'm trying to lose a bit of weight," confessed the newly-wed, blaming his love handles on lack of time for exercise but also the ever-so-healthy food eaten on the ceramah trail.

Just three years ago, he would not have imagined hitting political rallies coast to coast, or facing Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin on a political stage as far away as the United Kingdom.

Three years ago, the man who is so busy with politics today that he communicates with his wife via notes, was a general manager at Pharmaniaga, having moved there after six years in Petronas, and a PKR critic.

A member of the party in its early days, the 35-year-old had taken a break from politics to concentrate on his corporate career.

"I was just another corporate guy doing work, quite insulated from the real deal on the ground. I didn't go to ceramah, I read newspapers, I read Malaysiakini. So I was very critical of PKR on many fronts," he said.

So critical, that one day PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim got so tired of his griping that he offered Rafizi a job.

"It was also a time in my life when I thought I could take a break from corporate life although I never meant to be in politics like this. I only meant to be in policy, administrative policy, to help Pakatan states," he said.

Three years on, Rafizi is the director of strategy at the forefront of the exposes on the National Feedlot Corporation (NFC) and is "99.9 percent" certain to contest in the next general election.

He has focused much of his political activities in Kemaman, where he was raised, and is likely to "balik kampung" for the polls to take on BN big guns, "but the final decision is with the party".

Why anti-Pakatan Gaps is important

Is it all taking a toll on the former corporate high flyer and his new job as the CEO of the Selangor Economic Advisor's office?

"Not really because it's very complementary. Most of the things I do in (PKR) and Pakatan is policy," he said.

He explains that he plays an almost go-between role linking the party, coalition and government, working closely with the Selangor State Investment Centre and Selangor Economic Planning Unit.

Having gotten used to the slow but necessary pace of civil service - "a proposal has to be passed to each department", he laments - Rafizi is enjoying working with bureaucrats who, he says, "mostly want to just do their work".

Not discounting the "bad apples" still loyal to BN, he finds gratification in learning from civil servants and

helping Selangor achieve its "social agenda".

Stakeholders, he said, include vocal anti-Pakatan Selangor government group Gerakan Anti-Penyelewengan Selangor (Gaps) led by former PKR member Hamidzun Khairuddin, whom Rafizi is "still friends" with.

"With Gaps most of the things that they bring (forward) hold no water, but who knows in the future there could be (issues)... even in a Pakatan government after two or three terms might lose sight of many things and you require these kind of activism or public pressure on the government," he said.

It is MB Khalid Ibrahim's commitment to ensuring that the best outcome is reached for the most number of people, that could have caused critics to decry the slow pace of bureaucracy in Selangor, at least compared with Penang.

"Selangor is... delicate as a society and constituency because the public advocacy is quite vibrant. I'm not saying Penang is not, but Penang only has, for example, two municipal councils.

"Selangor has about 10 - it's a lot bigger, more industries and therefore more stakeholders that we have to engage with and talk to," he said.

Cats, paycuts and babies

His experience in the corporate world has helped him in policy-making, particularly in the area of subsidies, but more than this, his time at Petronas has left him a gift close to his heart.

"When I left Petronas, my staff gave me a kitten. At first I was pissed off because I couldn't even take care of myself, now I have to take care of this cat!... But at one time I traveled everywhere with Kristi," he said.

With things turning hectic, Kristi, is now living with his master's parents while the self-confessed cat lover is learning to live with the paycut that comes with the public service.

Things were "okay" at first, he said, but moving from policy to politics takes a big chunk of the pay and money going out "is more than what goes in" especially near elections.

"But I was lucky because I don't have an expensive lifestyle. I stay in a cheapskate house, I drive a cheapskate car, and almost debt free in one sense or another so, it takes some of the pressure off," he said.

A little bit of pressure may come when a baby - "we're trying," he shares - comes along, but for now things are good.

"It has been a a humbling experience. I was out of touch in the corporate world after a while you stop complaining because whatever you have, other people have less...

"Thank God, I'm married so if anything happens, okay lah," he said, laughing, thanking his lucky stars for such an understanding wife, whose identity he chooses not to disclose.

"She's anonymous. She works in a bank, not in politics at all but I can say she's a diehard fan of Pakatan," he said.

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