

Azizan places PAS on horns of painful dilemma
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By Terence Netto

COMMENT Kedah Menteri Besar Azizan Abdul Razak's decline from competent Islamic jurist to reactionary rube has been a sad business.

The Kedah state assembly's recent passage of an amendment to an enactment whose effect is to render absolute power to the mufti and fatwa committee detracts from the sultan's position as head of the religion in the state.

Besides, the amendment confers autarky status on the state mufti and fatwa committee, something that would be at odds with the philosophy of governance espoused by Pakatan Rakyat.

The measure has drawn a police report by the Tunku Laksamana Kedah, Tunku Mansor Tunku Kassim, a member of the royal council.

The move is bound to trigger a crisis because the Sultan of Kedah is revered by his subjects. This controversy is the last thing PAS would want.

NONEWith a general election fast approaching, the contretemps place Azizan's stewardship of state back where it has been for some years now - in the glare of unwelcome publicity.

PAS must now regret they did not compel Azizan to retire when heart problems briefly laid him low last year; it was said the top leadership pushed for him to resign but backed off when he resisted their importuning.

The leadership had been aware of growing unease with the MB, not only felt by the DAP and PKR complement of the Pakatan Rakyat state government but also by Kedah PAS leaders.

Perhaps the niceties that attend intra-party wrangles in an Islamic party prevented a forceful presentation to the ailing Azizan that he should step aside simply because he was not effective.

The Kelantan lesson

Anwar Ibrahim was in a more enviable situation when he was faced with the same problem in Penang in 2009 when his pick for the deputy chief minister's role turned out to be a niggling embarrassment.

However, Fairuz Khairuddin was a nobody plucked from obscurity for the post; Anwar had an easier time easing him out the door.

By contrast, Azizan is a senior member of the PAS hierarchy. Telling him to go because he was simply not good was never going to be easy.

The MB was adamant in pressing his claims for retention and the top leadership, with an eye to averting internecine troubles - which could be triggered by an Azizan-led revolt - decided to relent and wait things out.

After all, a general election was rapidly approaching; inviting internecine troubles is not the way to prepare for it.

PAS are mindful of a phase of the history of their administration in their stronghold of Kelantan.

There, in 1977, a schism in PAS led by the incumbent Menteri Besar Mohamed Nasir enabled Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah to plot the ouster of PAS from the reins of government and to inaugurate an Umno ascendancy that lasted until 1990 when current MB Nik Aziz Nik Mat reasserted the PAS domination.

With that important - and lesson-teaching - phase of their history in Kelantan as background, the top leadership of PAS treaded gingerly when approaching the festering leadership issues in Kedah.

Also, the fact that a general election was in the offing compelled them to tiptoe.

Unfortunately, long-germinating leadership issues do not obey the discretion demanded by election year schedules.

These can spurt and twist at awkward moments, leaving proponents of timely, but withheld, action regretting their procrastination.

PAS will need to bite the bullet

Earlier this year, two PAS members of the Kedah state executive council announced they would decline reappointment to the council (appointments in Kedah are done on an annual basis).

That was the cue the discontent with Azizan had arrived at a critical mass.

DAP and PKR leaders muttering against the maladroit Azizan is one thing: the grumbles can be dismissed as a function of people who do not understand the Islamic style of administration.

However, the frustrations of PAS state exco members against the MB, as demonstrated in two compatriots' refusal to be reappointed to the exco, is a more serious matter.

But if the top leadership of PAS found itself in a bind last year when they attempted to force Azizan's departure, using his illness as pretext, they were in greater difficulty this time round, what with the general election imminent and the chances of BN regaining the state and PAS retaining it said to be evenly poised.

Azizan again won out in the contest of wills between him and the top leadership in PAS which decamped to Alor Star to work out a compromise.

If one felt that the crisis caused by two PAS state exco members declining reappointment should have induced Azizan to henceforth proceed with caution, he has now suggested it had the opposite effect.

Passage of the amendment to the enactment making the state fatwa and mufti committee an absolutist body is something that is simply not done.

PAS would have to bite the bullet and rid their Kedah leadership of someone who is plainly an albatross.

If there is a silver lining in this cloud, it is that there is no mystique that clings to an ulama when it comes to the question of suitability for political leadership.

