

PKR trying to finesse a bad lie

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COMMENT Like a golfer who has finessed a bad lie, PKR, in fielding adviser Anwar Ibrahim for the vacant Kajang seat in the Selangor State Assembly has opted for a strategy that is almost certain to have an ameliorative effect on intra-party tensions which lately threatened to spiral out of control.

That in itself is sufficient reason, within the party, to hail the decision.

Against a wider context, though, the move spurs inferences more sorry than salutary for Anwar's standing as parliamentary opposition leader and as the federal opposition's prime minister-in-waiting.

Adverse implications, however, count for little when general elections are a long four years down the road and when a political party is caught in the throes of internecine feuding that only a leader of Anwar's mettle in PKR can defuse.

Given the potential for upheaval of PKR's internal feuds, the presence of Anwar, if elected from Kajang, in the state assembly is certain to have an inhibiting effect on the contending forces.

The main driver for the intramural tension is deputy president Azmin Ali's coveting the position of Selangor menteri besar whose occupant, Abdul Khalid Ibrahim, is widely seen as doing nicely but not nearly enough.

On the face of it, Azmin's covetousness is insupportable: he could get only four PKR state representatives to sign a letter of endorsement of his bid for the MB's post.

If you discount the votes of Khalid and Azmin, the four endorsements are only a third of the PKR total of 14 assemblypersons in Selangor.

Put that against a backdrop of virtually no assists for him from among the 15 state reps each for PKR allies DAP and PAS in the Pakatan Rakyat coalition which rules the state, you will find the parliamentary arithmetic of support is simply not there for Azmin's bid to become MB.

But the ardour behind the vaulting ambition of some politicians is not cooled even when support for it is forbiddingly small.

Lack of consultation

Azmin had wanted the Selangor MB's post the first time it became available when PKR swept to power with its allies DAP and PAS on a wave of voter enthusiasm for the opposition in the general election of March 2008.

Khalid got the role instead and proceeded to do quite well, his vaunted management skills, clean image and frugal spending helping the state's reserves to accumulate to RM2.7 billion, an achievement most would applaud but PKR partisans, with an eye to building up the party, would view as unexpended opportunity.

Prior immersion in corporate culture at government-linked companies had not sensitised Khalid to the political aspects of his role as MB: he doesn't seem to know that politics is also about rewards to party loyalists and creating opportunities for the enterprising among the faithful.

Compounding this drawback is his lack of inclination for consultation within PKR, a defect that recently led him to raise the salaries of state reps and executive councillors sharply at a time when such increases would be seen as indulgent by voters reeling from price hikes to essential goods.

Further, his handling of negotiations with the federals on control of Selangor's water assets mirrored his non-consultative style, a constant source of frustration to leading lights within the party.

The latter, after last May's general election, placed Saifuddin Nasution in the MB's secretariat to facilitate liaison between the chief minister and the party.

Khalid's support staff gave the party secretary-general the runaround. A bamboozled Saifuddin soon quit.

The protective cordon around Khalid, marshaled by his political secretary Faekah Husin, who loathes Azmin, can give people they see as interlopers the creeps.

Faekah was delegated by Khalid to handle water negotiations with the federals. Not surprisingly, the party is complaining of not being in the loop about the latest developments in the matter.

A well-heel Azmin

PKR's dilemma is that it is doubtful Azmin would make a better MB than Khalid.

He may well make a good MB for the party - no, make that a good MB for his supporters within the party.

Several PKR candidates in the general election who were short of funds for their campaigns received financial aid from Azmin.

The party's nominees had to dig into their own pockets because PKR is not flush with funds. But, seemingly, Azmin was and proved to be generous to cash-strapped candidates nominated by the party.

His help was strategic: he is eyeing the president's post which is expected to become vacant once weary incumbent Dr Wan Azizah Ismail retires at upcoming party elections.

Azmin's munificence continued after the general elections, extending to duit raya to party minions at Aidilfitri festivities last August.

Party supremo Anwar could only afford RM500 duit raya and one set of baju melayu; Azmin forked out a lot more and gave more than one set of clothes.

Additionally, there was a trip to Indonesia for one team of supporters, and another coterie was sent for the minor haj (umrah).

Azmin is well heeled from an auto dealership he obtained a long time ago but his watchers within the party did not expect such depth to his pockets.

Azmin is a lieutenant of Anwar's of longstanding fealty. He has accomplished most of the important tasks the supremo had bid him to in a tie going back three decades.

He began in Anwar's service as a recommendation from Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Anwar's benefactor turned nemesis.

His steady loyalty is a useful reminder that politically-inspired relationships need not be as capricious as Mahathir's with Anwar turned out to be.

Accumulated IOUs

The capstone of that loyalty was the way Azmin fought to forge the merger between PKR's precursor, Parti Keadilan Nasional, and Parti Rakyat Malaysia to

form Parti Keadilan Rakyat in 2002.

PKN's Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (Abim) complement of supporters, despite urgings from a goaled Anwar in Sungai Buloh where he was confined (1999-2004) on trumped-up charges, opposed the merger.

Anwar had been founding president of Abim, so their opposition was hard to take.

The merger has turned out to be useful and wise long after it was gravely doubted and flatly opposed by the Abim remnant of PKN.

For this fidelity to Anwar, Azmin thinks he is owed big time. But he does not think the accumulated IOUs are compelling enough for him to supersede Anwar in any way.

That's why he won't contest the party presidency if Anwar goes for it, as many now expect, and he won't push for the MB's post in Selangor if Anwar is available and interested.

Simultaneously as a check on Azmin and as a prod to Khalid to correct flaws and shortfalls, Anwar's decision to contest for a seat in Selangor is a manoeuvre that will gain several desired PKR ends.

Additionally, the manoeuvre affords the advantage to Anwar of identification of someone presently in the 25-35 year age group, a demographic that is full of promise for PKR, who would be suitable for taking over from Khalid in due time.

That person would have to have the strengths that Khalid and Azmin enjoy without the weaknesses both are saddled with.

In sum, the decision to field Anwar in Kajang enables PKR to finesse a difficult lie, in golfing parlance.

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