

The dearth of transparency and democracy in PKR

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COMMENT For years I defended Anwar Ibrahim. For years I defended PKR. I defended and I defended, until the day came where it became impossible to defend the indefensible.

People always like to speculate whether people change their positions due to money. In all honesty, I think that's a healthy speculation.

After yesterday's article, more than one person asked about the profits I made working for the Selangor government. I had a good run, and earned a similar amount as the people I went to school with, for the three years I was with Selangor.

In the middle of last year, I was informed my services would no longer be required.

They did not explain why at length (except perhaps to hint that I was costing too much), and I did not really ask or pursue the matter. My last day of work was around November 2013, and I have not had any professional engagement with them since.

Given the abrupt dismissal, perhaps people would have been less surprised if I had turned on Abdul Khalid Ibrahim instead of Anwar Ibrahim.

In any case, let's get to it.

Many people are throwing about words like 'tactics', 'strategy', 'Mahathirism', 'racial and religious incitement', 'strengthening Pakatan Rakyat', etc, etc.

I'll spend a few words on all those later, but for my money, they have nothing to do with the most important implication of what is going on.

The murky game of cloaks and daggers

To me, the real problem pivots on how Anwar and his associates are running PKR in a manner that is completely bereft of transparency, accountability and democratic principles.

Let's carry out a simple thought exercise: How did the decision to carry out the Kajang plan come about?

I don't know, do you?

Many have speculated (myself included), many claim it happened one way or another, but the truth is: nobody outside the nebulous 'inner circle' has any idea.

PKR has a large supreme council that is mostly democratically elected, and a smaller political bureau. Can we say with confidence that members of both were given an opportunity to voice their opinions, much less be made fully aware of what was going on? Are there official minutes perhaps, that we might refer to?

Beyond PKR, there are the leaders of PAS and DAP, and there are the representatives of the Selangor State Assembly - all democratically elected as representatives by party members, and by the rakyat.

How many of them had a say in the decision that would so heavily influence who would be the number one person in the Selangor state government? Were there broad consultations among party leaders, elected representatives, and (God forbid) the rakyat? Or was it presented to the world as a *fait accompli*?

The day Lee Chin Cheh (left) resigned his seat in Kajang, someone theoretically in the top 10 ranking of PKR leaders messaged me, saying: "I guess I'm always the last to know. Sigh"

If he/she is the last to know, what more the rest of us?

This is the latest - and by my reckoning the last straw - in a culture of cloak and dagger politics within PKR that for too long now has circumvented transparency and democracy in favour of whispered deals made in backrooms that no one is privy to.

I suppose it was stupid of us to expect democracy from a party whose 'de facto leader' has no democratic mandate whatsoever.

These issues have not been the focus of public attention, but in my mind, the implications of this style of politics continuing to spiral out of control is the most significant factor in the entire crisis.

'The bigger picture'

All these years, I felt that despite these problems, it was important to maintain

unity in order to fight the bigger enemy: Umno.

It's a sad day when you turn around and realise that the people you've been fighting for have come to live and breathe so deeply the culture you thought you were fighting against.

Over the years, I have spent countless words trying to fight cynicism against politics, and speaking out against armchair critics who seem fuelled mostly by self-righteous anger, and who never seem to get their hands dirty.

I did this because, like so many others, I wanted to concentrate on the big picture. I desperately wanted a Malaysia free of Umno.

On Tuesday, I realised how far some politicians would go in abusing and manipulating this desperation.

For too long now, I think Anwar, PKR and Pakatan have become convinced that they can get away with murder, because they believe those of us who hunger for change simply have no other options.

They assume we truly, truly will vote for Pakatan (and Anwar) no matter what, as long as no alternative (like another party, or say, Khalid) exists.

I had always thought there was a limit as to how far they would go. It would appear not.

Talking cock

Alarm bells should start ringing when politicians say things that don't make sense, and expect you to believe it.

At some point in 'The Life Of Pi', a pair of Japanese gentleman are presented with two different stories, and are asked: which story do you prefer?

The question was not which do you think is true, the question was: which do you prefer?

Too often we believe what we want to, not what the facts suggest. It is a struggle to be objective, but it is a struggle well worth undertaking.

The first story

Let me try to present, as objectively as I possibly can, two stories that might explain what is going on.

The first has been articulated most popularly by Rafizi Ramli - a man whose sharp intelligence is reflected crystal clear in the politically savvy tone he used to make his argument.

This story suggests that we are on the edge of a crisis; that forces linked to former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad are looking to dethrone Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, and instigate an era of unprecedented racial and religious strife.

This story has it that in order to take Putrajaya, it is imperative that Anwar be a state assemblyman of Selangor.

That is all that Rafizi claims at this point, but I think it is not too much of a stretch to assume that he means that Anwar must become the Selangor menteri besar in order to effectively use Selangor as a "launchpad" to take over Putrajaya.

It is nothing short of comical to think that Anwar has some other role to play as a state assemblyman alone.

This story also has it that "option is key" - that somehow the ability to choose between Khalid, Anwar and someone else does not represent potential instability, but is rather some kind of ace up PKR's sleeve against the Umno leviathan.

Given the process that needs to be carried out in order to change the menteri besar, the palace dynamics and the uncertain position that PAS will take, it seems to me that this move will actually create great instability all around, where once the only instability existed was those perpetrated incessantly by party leaders.

There is also a warning about Selangor becoming Kedah, despite the fact that while Pakatan lost Kedah in the elections, Selangor increased its seat count by eight times more than any other state government that gained more seats in GE13.

Other people allude to reasons that they "can't talk about" things behind the scenes that we "wouldn't understand".

If we were really privy to all the discussions and the real reasons, I personally don't think we wouldn't understand; it's more like we wouldn't approve. That's why we haven't been made privy to them, and are served in their place steaming piles of horse manure.

The second story

Now let's try another story. In this story, Khalid runs the state in a way that makes the people happy, but makes politicians unhappy.

The last thing I want to do is make things up out of thin air. To elaborate on the previous statistic - in GE13, Negeri Sembilan increased its state assembly seats by one; Penang did the same. Selangor increased its seats by eight.

People love to yell until they're blue in the face, saying that this or that is what the public really thinks, but this hard statistic is nevertheless incontrovertible. It does not prove conclusively that the public is happy with Khalid, but there are more statistics that provide statistics that suggest the opposite (which is quite remarkable, considering Khalid's complete deprioritisation of public relations work).

Recently, in a poll by The Star, Khalid was top choice for menteri besar, obtaining nearly the same amount of votes as the next two candidates put together (Anwar and Rafizi).

I could be wrong, but was there a Merdeka Center poll some years back where Khalid was shown to be a more popular leader than Anwar? If so, I can't imagine it made Anwar feel too good.

The part where Khalid makes politicians unhappy I think goes without saying - sometimes for perfectly valid reasons, reasons I myself have experienced and been frustrated by.

Are they reasons enough to remove him? For my money, not by a long shot.

In any case, Khalid probably thinks it is beneath him to defend his record (can you imagine anyone else in his position maintaining the relative silence that he has?), so I won't presume to do it for him.

In this story, the most important thing about Khalid is that he does not easily accede to party wishes. If you ask his detractors, this applies to questions of policy (though I cannot think of many such policies). If you ask his supporters, this applies to how the party wants the state to be a bigger "resource" for party activities.

If you ask a cynic, he or she would say, all the PKR people want is their fingers in the jar that Khalid has kept so tightly closed.

Is it all just about the money? To say so would probably be a disservice to the varied members of the 'Anwar for menteri besar' team.

Or, is it mostly about the money?

I suppose you will have to look as objectively as you can at the things they are saying. If they make sense to you, then the answer is 'no'. If they do not make sense to you, then the answer is 'yes'.

Feudal politics and Umno DNA

People like to say that PKR is like Umno, but they seldom go into specifics. In what way does it or does it not resemble Umno?

I think PKR is most like Umno in that it is an extremely feudal party. The most efficient and traditional feudal boss is Azmin Ali (a man who perhaps stands to gain the most from a debacle in Kajang), while Anwar's feudal style leans more towards playing people off on one another, thus making himself as indispensable as possible.

Feudal politics cannot exist unless there exists money, resources and power to dole out. The Selangor menteri besar can dole out a lot. Opposition Leader? Not so much.

In the latter story, perhaps this latest ploy is also consciously or subconsciously motivated by a desire to stay relevant - to inspire followers who are losing faith, energy or both, and to do so at any cost.

PAS and DAP

It appears PAS is divided. Its newly-minted Youth chief has taken a hard stance, which I can appreciate, while the rest of the leaders may once again be bullied (for the "bigger picture") to go along for the ride. Why they keep letting PKR do this to them? I do not quite understand.

Meanwhile, motivating some quarters in DAP is the belief that someone like Anwar can relieve some of the pressure they are feeling due to the Allah issue.

If they think Anwar has the magic bullet that will bring us closer to actual solutions on this issue, I fear they will be sorely disappointed. However, this is merely an opinion of mine, for which insufficient space for elaboration exists.

The grass is always greener on the other side, and I think it will be too late by the time the delusions clear, and people realise exactly what they threw away when they replaced Khalid.

Enough politics of fear

We believe what we want to. Sometimes this leads to idolatry. Inside so many of us lives a burning yearning for change, and a pining for shining heroes to make that change real.

These are completely understandable yearnings; but if we let them compromise our objectivity and our judgment, then we shall be forever lost.

I was saddened to see Lim Kit Siang use May 13 as some sort of bogeyman after so many years of berating MCA for doing exactly the same thing.

If you read Rafizi's admittedly eloquent, beautifully crafted defence with greater care, you will see significant strains of the same politics of fear: we must do this because of the Umno threat; we must do this because without Anwar, Selangor will crumble like Kedah; we must do this because only Anwar is a light strong enough to fight the oncoming dark.

Scary words, but the facts quite simply do not seem to bear them out.

Every one of us will have to choose in this free marketplace of ideas which stories make the most sense, and every one of us will have to live with the consequences of our choices. At the end of the day, as always, we will get the government we deserve.

It's been a difficult time, but there is no point in living unless we truly believe that for every closed door, a window opens. All we have to do is to find it.

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