

## **Reasons solid and subtle for Anwar's candidacy**

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COMMENT Tonight Anwar Ibrahim and Khalid Ibrahim are scheduled to explain PKR's decision to force a by-election for the Kajang state seat in Selangor at a ceramah.

Aware of the mostly negative vibes the decision has drawn from the public, the opposition leader and Selangor menteri besar have been forced onto the back foot.

There they will stay if they do not put forward arguments more cogent than the ones adduced thus far by PKR director of strategy Rafizi Ramli, the decision's principal proponent - by his own confession - and most ardent defender.

Last week, in the wake of the announcement that PKR Kajang assemblyperson Lee Chin Cheh had resigned and Anwar was to be fielded as substitute, Rafizi attempted to stem spiralling criticism with an explanation of the reasons for this turn of events.

He observed that Khalid had done well in administering the richest state in the country; and he would be prodded to do even better, said Rafizi, if Khalid has Anwar in reserve.

Rafizi (right) also said the move to field Anwar was also preemptive because he expected Najib Razak to become the second prime minister in succession to fall to Umno curmudgeon Dr Mahathir Mohamed's 'chop and change PMs' penchant.

This lopping off, Rafizi predicted, would be the start of a sustained and multi-pronged campaign to shake the Pakatan Rakyat government in Selangor to its foundations.

Selangor is the diamond in the 13-state Malaysian crown. Najib's replacement was expected, on Mahathir's promptings, to brook no restraint in the battle to oust Pakatan that would be waged by Umno.

The MP for Pandan, the brightest talent in PKR's constellation of second-tier leaders, said Anwar's presence in Pakatan's leadership cohort for Selangor would boost the coalition's strength and resilience in the face of an expectedly marauding Umno.

As a first term parliamentarian, Rafizi perhaps had not as yet heard of a principle of parliamentary democracy called the 'right of recall.'

If he had, he would certainly have deployed it among the reasons he furnished for explaining PKR's decision to force a resignation in a state ward held by the party and field their top leader for the vacancy.

The right of recall caters for the need of elected representatives to resign and pave the way for by-elections in times when combustible issues are flaring in the public arena.

Right of recall a legitimate resort

Since an election is a placebo for a democratic polity's periodic distempers, the right of recall is a legitimate resort of elected representatives when combustible issues arrive at ignition point in the public arena.

This was what Umno's Shahrir Samad (left) did in August 1988 when he quit his JB parliamentary seat and forced a by-election in which he stood as an independent and won.

1988 was a fraught year in Malaysian politics. In May of that year, the head of the judiciary, Salleh Abbas, was removed as Lord President, a move he resisted, prompting impeachment proceedings presided over by the very judge, Abdul Hamid Omar, who stood to gain had Salleh been found guilty of the charges preferred against him by an international tribunal of judges.

In the event, Salleh was impeached and Abdul Hamid took over, a sequence of events that - if one considered the spate of Internal Security Act detentions that occurred in October the previous year in which more than a hundred politicians and social activists were rounded up - constituted the most severe and sustained implosion to have occurred in Malaysian politics since the May 13 racial riots of 1969.

Shahrir's exercise of the right of recall in August 1988 was that democratic principle's most eloquent invocation in Malaysian politics in the post-May 13 period.

His re-election in that poll conveyed the point that the then-prime minister Mahathir's dictatorial actions had incurred the ire of voters.

Shortly afterwards, the rules governing by-elections were amended to make them

rather difficult to compel, a typically Mahathirian response - if he met a rule he didn't like, he brought it to heel by amending it.

Lee Chin Cheh's resignation as assemblyperson for Kajang comes at a time that is comparably fraught to the one that led Shahrir to resign and re-contest in August 1988

Unlike Shahrir, Lee is not re-contesting but is stepping aside so that his PKR party leader may be fielded.

This is not an abuse of the right of recall. Lee knows Anwar is the more effective candidate for the fulfillment of the right of recall in the present situation.

Anwar is not just the PKR, but also the Pakatan, leader most equipped to combat Umno's racially- and religiously-tinged campaign to polarise Malaysian society between Umno-supporting right wing Malays and opposition-favouring non-Muslims allied with autocracy-disdaining Muslims.

This polarisation was exacerbated by the decision of the Selangor Islamic Affairs Department (Jais) to seize copies of Malay and Iban language Bible from the premises of the Bible Society of Malaysia on Jan 2.

Domestic cause celebre, with international overtones

Jais' action has ratcheted up tensions between Muslims and Christians in Malaysia which have been steadily rising since a legal battle over the issue of whether Christians can use the word 'Allah' in rituals of worship and faith education broke out in 2009.

The issue has become a domestic cause celebre, with international overtones. Anwar and his Pakatan colleague, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang, have espoused the line that non-Muslims can use the word 'Allah' provided use of it is not abused.

If elected, Anwar's presence in the Selangor state assembly and path to the MB's position would enable him to bring his powers of persuasion and reasoning to bear on such councils as the Rulers' Council, the annual conference of the nine hereditary rulers of states in the Malay peninsula whose deliberations on matters of grave importance like judicial appointments and promotions and Malay reserve land issues can be of decisive import.

Malay reserve land is being sold by greedy cabals in Umno rather cheaply to commercial interests. This is spreading disquiet in the Malay community, a feature

that has not been adequately conveyed to the community's ostensible guardians in the Rulers' Council.

Sceptics may demur but Anwar is committed to the persuading arts. His candidature for the Kajang state seat will deepen and widen his access to opinion-making circles with high impact on policy.

In short, there are reasons solid and subtle for PKR's pitching their iconic leader into the Selangor legislative fray.

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