

PAS deftly dodges frightful dilemma
MalaysiaKini.com
Aug 17, 2014

COMMENT It was a decision that showcased politics as the art of the possible.

By backing both PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and deputy president Azmin Mohd Ali as candidates to replace Selangor Menteri Besar Khalid Ibrahim, PAS took a leaf out of an ace soccer dribbler's handbook.

In one swerve, the Islamic party shimmied past the accusation it is gender-biased it it had objected to Wan Azizah (right) as the sole Pakatan Rakyat candidate for Khalid's post.

Then, in coupling Azmin's name with Azizah's in the list the party would back, PAS sashayed past the danger of a looming break-up of the opposition coalition, responsibility for which would have been placed squarely at its feet.

Rarely has a political player, faced with the daunting dilemma that the Islamic party has had to shoulder in recent weeks, been able to emerge from a frightful predicament with credibility intact.

Not bad at all, for a party whose critics had direly speculated all of the past few weeks as caught in an obscurantist trap.

Now the ball is at the feet of PAS' coalition allies, PKR and DAP. They must tread carefully.

Any public grousing by them to the effect that serving up a double to the Sultan of Selangor (left) on whom should replace Khalid would display unseemly incoherence on the part of Pakatan would be seen as mealy mouthed.

PKR and DAP must leave well enough alone and as a united coalition request for an audience with the Selangor ruler to proffer the list.

They must have the foresight to know that the crisis triggered by their attempt to remove the incumbent MB of Selangor has run its course and now requires a cessation.

Any attempt to whittle the list of replacement candidates commended by PAS runs the risk of protraction to the crisis.

It was bad enough that the crisis broke out; it would be foolhardy to allow it to broil further.

The dire speculation that Pakatan would break up by dint of PAS deciding to persist with its

backing of Khalid has been deftly left behind.

Spanner into the works

Three weeks ago, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang had hurled a spanner into the works by backing Khalid to continue as MB of Selangor after a Pakatan presidential leadership council had endorsed Wan Azizah as Khalid's replacement.

When Hadi's obstruction was backed by the spiritual leader of PAS, Nik Aziz Nik Mat (left), it became obvious that Pakatan was up against the most severe challenge to its cohesion in its brief six-year history.

A week later the powerful PAS syura council reinforced the danger of an imminent break-up to Pakatan by throwing its support behind Khalid.

Matters were not helped in that a recalcitrant Khalid, in contravention of the sage advice attributed to American President Theodore Roosevelt that, in statecraft, one should talk softly but carry a big stick, brandished a hefty cane and coupled that with rash talk.

Needless to say, this produced a sorry spectacle that undermined public confidence in Pakatan more than anything destructive that Umno-BN had been able to do to its rivals since March 2008 when the powers-that-be realised that they were no longer monarchs of the parliamentary survey.

As an alternative to the Umno-BN, in the past several weeks Pakatan was wobbling in the quicksand of intra-coalition dissension and flagrant defiance by a rebellious luminary in its leadership cohort.

But seriously, a political coalition, particularly one of disparate ideologies like Pakatan's, is only as strong as recurrent tests of cohesion have seen it survive.

Today Pakatan survived a formidable test of its cohesion; the coalition is here to stay. PAS has acquitted itself creditably well.

While Pakatan's well-wishers should not giddily swing to the conclusion that that which unites Pakatan in opposition to Umno-BN is stronger than that which divides it on issues like hudud, the conclusion is inescapable: the coalition's components know in their marrow that the majority of Malaysia voters want political reform.

This reform is better accomplished if power is transferred from one coalition (Umno-BN) to its rival (Pakatan), rather than if assayed by existing holders, who slightly shuffle this power among themselves.

Malaysian democracy has renewed its lease on life and its promise of reform.

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