

Party divided over Anwar's pull-out
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How badly do PKR members want Anwar Ibrahim to lead their party?

The answer is quite evident, even to the extent that they are willing to risk the party being de-registered ahead an expected snap general election - predicted by many political pundits to be as early as August.

But the man himself - after hearing emotional pleas from delegates for about 40 minutes at the party's congress and election in Seremban on Saturday - stayed firm in his decision to withdraw.

A large number of delegates were obviously unhappy with his decision, and were shocked with how the much-awaited contest in the end turned into a no-contest. Apart from Anwar, the other contender, Abdul Rahman Othman, also pulled out.

In fact, up till the moment Anwar took the stage to convey his decision at 12.40pm, many delegates still believed he was very much in the contest.

This is why delegates interrupted his speech mid-way, insisting that their views be heard before he officially announced his decision. Anwar, instead, asked the delegates to give full support to his wife and incumbent president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who later retained her post uncontested.

Anwar's main reason for the withdrawal was that the Registrar of Societies (ROS) has threatened to dissolve the party if he was elected as the president.

Anwar's task now is to ensure the party stay focused on facing a possible early general election.

Emotional pleas

Those who spoke at the congress overwhelmingly did not buy this 'play safe' argument.

An emotional PKR Youth exco member Ahmad Zaki Yamani told the crowd: "We have gone through so much throughout all these years, we are a party based on a struggle.

"We have to send a clear message to the Prime Minister (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) if he dares to dissolve PKR, let's see what's the consequences to Barisan Nasional," he said as more than 70 percent of those in the hall stood up to support him and chanted 'reformasi'.

Another Youth exco Latheefa Koya asked: "What is the meaning of saving the party for the sake of saving the party and have a legal status, which is meaningless? If Anwar is pulling out because of the ROS' threat, that is very sad."

Those who think otherwise appealed to the rest to look at the bigger picture.

Referring to Wan Azizah's speech which cited the Soloman's Justice, a delegate told fellow

delegates: "Don't kill the baby - our party. Those who love the party will take care of the baby."

In short, delegates who were disappointed with Anwar's withdrawal, not just on the 360 degree about-turn from their advisor, were also puzzled with what has gone wrong with the 'lawan tetap lawan' spirit and letting the delegates to make their choice.

Some have also raised questions on why Rahman - whom Anwar called a "dear friend" today - chose to pull out unexpectedly in the last minute since he was firm in going against the Anwar-Azizah faction despite knowing he was going to lose the fight.

One has gone to the extent of calling this "like a charade" but delegate Gaddafi Ismail disagreed.

"This is the best compromise we can come up with, I am sure Anwar wants to be a president if he can. For me, this is not a drama. Today he may not be the president but he is still the PKR president to us," he said.

Admitting that he was surprised by Anwar's decision, another delegate S Jayathas however urged fellow members to be "rational".

"We can always call for EGM (extraordinary general meeting) next year and make Anwar the president," he noted.

Divided opinion

The split in PKR is not just among party members but also among its leaders.

Information chief Tian Chua was one who felt strongly about Anwar's withdrawal, openly criticising the latter for "going against the delegates' wish" in the meeting later in the day.

"My argument is the election on the top post should be allowed to go on, those who want to take the risk can vote for Anwar, those who are not can go for Wan Azizah and for those who think Anwar shouldn't have even started all this havoc can go for Rahman," he told malaysiakini.

He stressed the congress should be a place for the delegates to reach a consensus.

Chua appeared emotional outside the hall after Anwar announced the decision. He was heard repeatedly saying "what is the meaning of the congress?" and had to be calmed down by few other leaders like Dr Xavier Jeyakumar.

The differences of opinion among the PKR leaders on Anwar's withdrawal was also evident when a delegate asked those who wanted Anwar to lead the party to stand up and only a few like Chua, Jeyakumar, R Sivarasa, Shamsul Iskandar Md Akin and Dr Badrul Amin responded. The rest remained seated (photo below).

Vice-president Dr Lee Boon Chye admitted that the party was divided on Anwar's withdrawal, as it was a 'majority decision' after the matter was discussed at length at a three-hour supreme council meeting last night.

He blamed it on the ROS which derailed the party's plan to elect Anwar officially as president.

"At the end of the day, we are not entirely happy on what we have to do but the ROS has acted

in a mala fide (bad faith) manner in this matter, and our main concern is we have to put our focus in facing the general election," he said.

But judging from how the entire PKR election process was riddled with controversies up to the election day, challenges for Anwar ahead in facing the general election is not only to unite the opposition parties but also to deal with the disarray in his own party.

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