

The battle for Selangor within PKR
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COMMENT Competition and jostling for positions and power are par for the course for politicians in any political party, including the opposition parties in Malaysia.

The notion of the parties in Pakatan being made up of idealists who are united in a single purpose or for a single ideology should be disabused, especially after March 8, 2008, because of increased political stakes.

That said, the most recent political salvo fired by Azmin Ali, MP for Gombak and state assembly representative for Bukit Antarabangsa, comes across as nothing more than a naked power grab, barely a month after the PKR congress where indications were that the current MB of Selangor, Khalid Ibrahim, would be given some breathing room to enact reforms and to improve on his performance.

azlanThe shortcomings of Khalid are well-known and well-documented. Not all of them are necessarily bad traits to have and in fact have made him rather popular in the eyes of the general voting public. His insistence, for example, on not wanting to dish out contracts and favours to party insiders, including PKR MPs, while seen as a shortcoming from within his own party, actually boosts his public popularity.

Other weaknesses are more legitimate, including his inability to make quick decisions as a result of which many business opportunities in the state have been put on the backburner. His indecisiveness on certain matters have also led some Pakatan state assembly representatives, some of whom could easily have been turned into his allies, to view him as an impediment to development and to solving problems faced by the Selangor residents.

I am sure others who are more familiar with the affairs of the Selangor state government and know Khalid personally can tell you many more weaknesses (as well as strengths, I may add). But there must be better ways for Azmin to pressure Khalid to improve his performance (if this is even a consideration) or to legitimately challenge his leadership of the state.

Astute political operator

If Azmin wants to show that he can be a better MB than Khalid, then he has to show that he can do more for the state than be an astute political operator within his own party, which no one doubts. In fact, that is precisely his problem.

The general public, which is far less interested in the internal maneuvering of PKR and how Khalid may or may not be improving the institutional and financial capacity of his own party (both legitimate concerns), sees Azmin as nothing more than a political operator with greedy ambitions to replace Khalid.

In fact, I would even go so far as to say that most of the public who do follow politics closely probably sees Azmin as 'Anwar-like' and perhaps even 'Anwar-lite'. In other words, a skillful political operator with great ambition but somewhat lacking in substance and perhaps even patience.

Why not use his position as MP and ADUN to show to the public what kind of state Selangor

would be under his leadership? While I have not followed his debates in the state assembly closely, the thrust and content of his speeches in Parliament have mostly focused on revealing corruption on the part of the BN.

While this is an important responsibility (revealing corrupt practices), it shows a certain unwillingness to do the hard thinking which is required when it comes to examining important policy questions.

For example, how does the 10th Malaysian Plan affect the growth prospects of Selangor? In what way can the state government work with the federal government to carry out aspects of the 10th Malaysian Plan which calls for more development in the Greater KL area?

Everyone knows that Azmin wants to replace Khalid as the next MB of Selangor. Why not come out in the open to say this and to present an alternative plan of leadership rather than to resort to the same old Umno practices of 'wayang kulit' and political machinations behind the scenes? This is the very sort of thing which many voters voted against on March 8, 2008.

Naked ambition

Azmin has perhaps taken the playbook to the next level by having these open mutinies against Khalid. Even the much more inept Terengganu MB Ahmad Said has had greater reprieve from his Umno counterparts who despise his leadership, compared to the constant attacks Khalid and his staff have been subjected to, courtesy of Azmin.

Sadly, Azmin's naked ambition also shows his failure to appreciate the fact that even if he succeeds in unseating Khalid, the public damage done would be so great that Pakatan would not be able to retain the state. It would be different if Azmin could come in and demonstrate great leadership that would catapult Selangor to stratospheric heights of economic development or to capture the public imagination with a great vision of what Selangor will be under his leadership as MB.

But nothing I've seen leads me to believe that this will happen. In fact, many of Azmin's own weaknesses, including the inability to build institutional capacity within his own party and the preference to want to play internal politics (remind you of anyone?) would be exacerbated to a far more worrying degree if he took over from Khalid as MB, let's say starting tomorrow.

If this was the case, then his tenure as MB would probably last until the next general election. Furthermore, there's no telling what sort of lasting damage this would do to Pakatan's electoral prospects both within Selangor and at the national level. Just think of Anwar's own failed power grab on Sept 16, 2008.

It's still not too late for Azmin to demonstrate that he can be a better leader for Pakatan in Selangor than Khalid and not just a better political operator. He needs to use his new position as the chief of PKR in Selangor and his existing platforms as ADUN and MP to show that he has a clear vision of what he wants Selangor to be.

What Khalid must also do

Meanwhile, Khalid has to decide if he really wants his job and the extent he has to work in order to keep it.

He needs to realise that he cannot avoid the political aspects of his job. He needs to win support and gain allies from within his own party. He doesn't necessarily need to dispense projects to these potential allies. Perhaps by being more decisive, he can spur business opportunities in some of the constituencies of his political detractors.

Khalid may have been weakened by Azmin but he still holds the position of the MB and with that, the power that comes with the office. He needs to communicate the achievements of his state government more effectively. He also needs to restate the case for his own leadership and why Pakatan needs him to lead Selangor into the next general election.

In the meantime, I, like many other interested parties, will watch the continuing political battle between Azmin and Khalid. Finally, because of space, I have left out any discussion of Anwar Ibrahim's role in this. Fodder for another article perhaps?

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