

KJ the Perkasa Slayer out to win over youth voters?

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NEWS ANALYSIS May 2010 may have been a quiet month for Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin, at least in public but not for those who followed him on his Twitter microblog.

NONEWhile on his month-long training in the Askar Wataniah (Territorial Army, left), Khairy amused his 8,000 followers with witty snippets of his army stint, along with anecdotes about his training buddy, 19-year-old Rajah.

"There is no politics in the military, and if I can attract the other youth leaders, whether they are from Barisan Nasional, PKR, PAS or DAP, or the fence-sitters to join the Territorial Army as reserves, it will be good for the country," said the 34-year-old parliamentarian.

While he might be right in assessing the army reserves as apolitical, one wonders if his involvement in such a populist activity is not politically motivated.

NONETHis, along with his participation in the Football Association of Malaysia, Harper's Bazaar (right) cover and memorable acting in the '15Malaysia' short films project, begs the question: what is Khairy up to?

Those following Khairy's career may notice the 'pop culture' approach the Rembau MP is taking in an attempt to reposition himself as a "centrist radical".

This is in stark contrast to when he was sidekick to keris-waving then Umno Youth Chief Hishamuddin Hussein, which Khairy later claims in the NutGraph was an anomaly.

"Why did (I) pander to (the keris-waving ultra Malay sentiments)? I think we were caught in a situation where I saw this 'bad moon rising', (although) I didn't want it personally.

"And I didn't want the leadership to be outflanked by this. So, sometimes, when you notice that you can be outflanked, you go out there yourself to make sure that no one else claims that spot," he said.

But "bad moon" episode over, the Khairy today, either on Twitter or in real life in parliamentary debates and public forums, is a self-confessed reformist.

He has even brazenly gone against the party line, as when he echoed Pakatan Rakyat's vehement objection to sports betting - a bold move against the BN old guard that played in his favour.

Khairy also appears at times to be emulating his apparent economic-ideology buddy and fellow Oxford alumnus, DAP parliamentarian and party upstart Tony Pua.

NONEIn return, Pua (left) has openly endorsed his university-mate who was sidelined yet again for a cabinet post, adding "that (Khairy) will do a much better job than a whole bunch of deadwood in the cabinet".

Ironically, not holding a cabinet post frees Khairy to concentrate on his own 're-branding' and that of the BN Youth, piloted through the 1Malaysia rally.

And all the while, he has his finger firmly on the pulse of youth sentiments through focus

group BN Youth Labs, a luxury that Pakatan Youth lacks.

Showing up Pakatan youth

To a certain extent, his efforts are paying off, if only to show up the inexperienced Pakatan Youth politicians, whom political observer Khoo Kay Peng claims to be "losing their touch".

"It is hard to be an Opposition (elected representative), and many are finding that by the time they deal with the needs of their constituents, there is no more time to pick up the pieces as a political leader," he said.

Addressing the needs of their constituents also does not leave much room for activism, leaving a vacuum of leadership in youth politics, he said, and into this vacuum comes Khairy.

And by now going head-to-head with Malay rights' group Perkasa president Ibrahim Ali, Khairy is emerging as a more 'palatable' defender of Malay rights.

NONEThis makes him more appealing to the 'middle-ground' Malay urban youth who are not keen on the extreme views espoused by effigy-burning Perkasa.

Khairy also has an unlikely admirer in PKR Youth chief Shamsul Iskandar Mohd Amin (right), who despite deriding the BN Youth as desperate, conceded that he is quite "impressed" with his opponent's "wild exploration" for political survival.

Shamsul's proposal for PKR to host a Malay Congress to attract Malay youths also shows that Khairy's appeal amongst this demographic segment is not be something to be sniffed at.

Not quite Pied Piper

Personal popularity, however, may not be enough to turn him into the Pied Piper of urban youth votes, said Khoo, questioning Khairy's ability to remain consistent in his centrist views.

"If he was elected Minister of Youth, would he be able to say the same things? There is a lack of sincerity, and he is just playing to a small crowd," he said, postulating that Khairy's deft political manoeuvring may well turn against him.

jenice lee release on bail 240509 03And no matter how good Khairy is in acquiring a personal following, DAP Socialist Youth deputy chairperson Jenice Lee (right) believes that he can't replicate this on the BN or Umno level.

Likewise, BN Youth bid to attract a wider following via its 1Malaysia Youth Rally, she said, will at best only attract those already converted to the coalition's cause.

"He may be very popular on his own, but the fact is he is part of BN and they need a total overhaul, not just a cosmetic re-branding...he alone cannot rock the boat," she said.

Khoo meanwhile said that for as long as Khairy fails to convince urban youth voters that he is more than a political chameleon, BN Youth will have trouble swaying votes their way.

People are voting for hope, change and sincerity, he said, and for now, the BN Youth is still

far from being all three.

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