

**PKR incumbents bowing out, mad scramble possible**  
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Now that the PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim and the party deputy president Syed Husin Ali have stepped aside in the upcoming party elections, a bloodbath may be in the offing.

While party president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail has yet to announce her stand in defending her position, it appears that she will be left unchallenged.

NONE In a party where Anwar and his wife have achieved almost cult-like status, to go after either one of them could be a sure-fire way to end your political career with a bang.

Ask Abdul Rahman Othman (better known as ARO), PKR's deputy president who challenged Wan Azizah for the top post in the last party elections in 2007, only to pull out at the eleventh hour.

He then left the party for PAS shortly afterwards, maintaining a relatively low profile ever since.

And now, questions have risen if the sudden turn of events will throw a spanner into a supposed "succession plan" for the party.

Facing a possible jail term in the current sodomy trial, the party grapevine has been working overtime speculating who would be the next in line, especially when Anwar has been keeping his cards close to his chest.

Sources close to him also said that with his recent neutral stand, coupled with a stern warning to potential candidates not to exploit his name, the issue of succession will only arise after the 400,000 members have chosen their leaders.

Contest hotting up

But even before the announcements by Syed Husin and Anwar on Tuesday, contenders, or the supposed contenders for the deputy presidency are not exactly shying away from making the rounds shoring up subtle support.

NONE Maverick lawyer Zaid Ibrahim, (right) and vice-presidents Azmin Ali and Mustaffa Kamil Ayub's supporters are already engaged in a flood of press conferences and in running blogs.

Although one can already expect a three-horse race with the nominations just looming tomorrow, what is eagerly anticipated is the battle between Zaid and Azmin, whose rivalry dates back to as early as last October, just three months after the former had joined the party.

From their well-documented feud over control in Sabah, to the Hulu Selangor by-election in April when Zaid's camp had accused Azmin of sabotaging campaign efforts, their disdain for each other has been very apparent.

Mechanisms ranging from poison pen letters to nasty text messages are part of the realpolitik goings on in the PKR.

"But I don't think it is ugly. It is as it is. It is the process of democracy," said PKR communications chief Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad.

He also refuted the notion that the very nature of PKR's own direct elections, the first of its kind in the country, is the cause of it.

"Even without direct elections, there will still be tension during any party elections," he said.

azmin ali interview 220307 sizeBut while pro-Zaid and pro-Azmin(left) supporters are busy bickering with each other on the blogs, it is easy to overlook underdog Mustaffa Kamil, the current vice-president who by no means, is dwarfed by the giant presence of the other two in the race for the deputy presidency.

He has not thrown in his hat as yet, but the grassroots man famed for his ceramah and motivational talks appears to have the solid backing of PKR Perak of which he is chairperson.

In the 2007 party polls, he also managed to garner the third highest number of votes in the race for the vice-presidency, beating three others.

Party members may also be impressed by his gritty style of soapbox campaigning and the hard work he has put in as the party's international bureau head.

However, many have dismissed him as one who is unlikely to become a serious contender.

Zaid 'not a team player'

Meanwhile, while Zaid's entry into the party has grabbed national attention and awed party observers at his meteoric rise, a year later, many party insiders have been left unimpressed.

Zaid rose from the ranks into becoming one of the most successful of members of his community in his time, setting up the biggest law firm in the country, and strolling into the top echelon of the federal government.

abdullah ahmad badawi 020209 01He raised hopes and set a high benchmark of personal integrity when then Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (right) handpicked him to become the de facto Law Minister to oversee judicial reforms in 2008, only to resign almost six months later when an MP, a blogger and a journalist were detained under the Internal Security Act.

But after joining the PKR July last year, he had already stepped on a lot of the other PKR leaders' toes with his 'my way or the highway' stand on numerous issues.

A top party leader told Malaysiakini on condition of anonymity that Zaid is "at best, a loose cannon".

"One of Zaid's strengths is that he has attracted a lot of outsiders with his ideals and his liberal, vocal appeal.

"But those who have seen him work up close and personal will know that he is highly egotistical. He doesn't even come to most of the political bureau meetings but he will get

upset if we try to advise him," said the source.

Though Azmin, his rival, has an unblemished record as a party loyalist, his shrewd calculative personality has turned off many.

In fact, quite a number have dubbed him Anwar's "gatekeeper", often cold shouldering those not in agreement with him.

Several party leaders also said that while Azmin is almost a shoo-in by the fact that he has been with the party through thick and thin, he still lacks the leadership qualities that could carry the party in the event that Anwar is imprisoned for the second time.

"He is still seen as someone who is too attached to Anwar. He needs to wean himself off Anwar and to become a leader in his own right," said a party source.

And while the battle between Zaid and Azmin appear to be one that can be described as of a do-or-die nature, party elections are never a zero-sum game.

As one party leader put it, "once someone wins and the other loses, they will still have to work together".

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