

Syed Husin: End of an era
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EXCLUSIVE When PKR deputy president Syed Husin Ali announced that he would not be defending his party position, many were more worried about how it would affect the outcome of the hotly-contested party polls.

Almost immediately, journalists who had attended the press conference on Sept 14 had swarmed the veteran politician, asking him who he supports in the race for his position.

At the same time, many party election aspirants have been going around in their campaign, boasting of having received the blessing of the party deputy president of seven years.

While the PKR elections seem to be the flavour of the month, it is imperative to note that amidst the infighting and the mad scramble for party positions, it was that press conference that marked the beginning of the end of party politics for one of the pillars of Malaysian politics.

Syed Husin began his long foray into political activism even before he graduated from university in the 1950s. Since then, he rose up the ranks and even braved a six-year ISA detention to become a political party leader.

And having turned 74 just several days ago it is now just a few short months to go before he vacates his office in the PKR headquarters in Petaling Jaya.

In part two of a recent exclusive interview with *Malaysiakini*, Syed Husin tells his tale of achievements, regrets and getting rid of the "trash" in PKR.

'Rubbish in the party still lingers'

When PKR met at their annual congress in Kota Bharu in May, most of the delegates had trained their guns at the party leadership over the administration of the Pakatan Rakyat-governed states.

But Syed Husin reserved his harshest criticism at the string of party defections which seemed to have no end earlier this year.

In fact, many of the delegates were shocked that such vitriol could escape the lips of an otherwise diminutive, gentle and mild-mannered man.

Even to this date, Syed Husin did not mince his words when he called them "garbage", and that it only did the party a whole world of good that the defectors left the party.

"It is only a renewal process that the (five) MPs left. It was like a cleansing process for us," he said.

Still not letting up on his criticism on them, he added that the turncoats were only after positions or a quick buck.

"After all these garbage came out from the party, thousands of people joined us in return," he said.

No regrets

When asked what his biggest regret was in PKR, Syed Husin confidently (and surprisingly) said with a smile, "No regrets at all".

And almost like he has rehearsed the scenario of being asked this question, he almost immediately defended the merger between Parti Keadilan Nasional and his Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) which he helmed for 13 years since 1990.

Many political observers have noted that the merger in the end, did PRM no favours, claiming that it was PRM who had "compromised more" in the merger.

At a glance, it seemed that that was not too far from the truth as it could be seen that PRM, whose roots are steeped in left-wing libertarianism, has dissipated into the mass neoconservative culture of PKR.

Hardly surprising, considering that back then, the bulk of Keadilan was made up of disgruntled Umno men, disillusioned with the ruling party after the sacking and imprisonment of former deputy prime minister and current PKR *de facto* leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Even now, notable former PRM leaders such as PKR vice-president and lawyer R Sivarasa (*right*) have been lambasted by party peers for not being "Indian" enough. In this case, it meant not being fluent in Tamil, and not knowing Tamil songs and films.

And at the same time, the former PRM members are claiming that the objectives of the merger have yet to be seen - that is to marry PRM's intellectuals with Keadilan's mass.

To that, Syed Husin - who had been the main engineer of the merger itself - denied such dissatisfaction insisting that even if there is, there should not be a 'PRM gang' within PKR.

"PKR should be a rainbow party of many different groups," he said, dismissing that it's the PRM leaders who are being sidelined for more populist personalities.

'Books to write'

So what will Syed Husin miss most about party politics when he retires?

"I will miss the spirit of camaraderie which is prevalent during meetings like the political bureau or the national congress. The feeling of being on equal terms with everyone," he said.

He will then spend the rest of his time on his second love - writing.

"There are so many books I want to write. In fact, I may write something about what I think of the present PKR leaders," he said with a smile.

And when he finally bows out after the party's national congress slated for the end of November, as much as hopeful eyes will look towards his successor, the same people will also remember him for the struggles that he has been through in opposition politics.

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