

Ijok and the PKR dilemma
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After failing to make any headway in the just concluded Machap by-election, the opposition can ill afford to lose the Ijok by-election on April 28 - the last before the general election.

A loss at Ijok will not only significantly undermine opposition morale, but more importantly, it will dim Anwar Ibrahim's star quality as the lightning rod to rally the entire opposition to face off Barisan Nasional (BN).

Without doubt, Anwar - the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) adviser - is now the de facto leader and kingpin of the opposition triangle of PAS-PKR-DAP, which is not a united front.

PKR is allied to PAS and through Anwar's good offices, has also established a working relationship with DAP. But DAP has no working relationship with PAS due to differences over the Islamic state issue. So the opposition front is actually made up of two sub-fronts, namely PAS-PKR and PKR-DAP.

If Anwar were not around, the opposition will revert to its status in 1999 and would suffer an electoral defeat. DAP and possibly PKR may gain a few more seats, but only if there is a significant swing of Chinese votes to the opposition. It would not make any difference to the political status quo though.

Now let's imagine that Anwar is around, but has lost his pull on the masses. His presence would have little impact on the electoral outcome.

If he retains his charismatic traction over the masses, as demonstrated in the tumultuous days of 1998, and he unleashes its full force on BN in the coming general election, wouldn't it make all the difference in the electoral chances of the entire opposition front?

But can anyone be certain that his leadership is still intact? From the lacklustre results of the Machap by-election, where Anwar appeared only on the election eve to rally support for the DAP candidate, I dare say that not a few have some doubts. Although large crowds turned up and responded well to his speeches, this apparent enthusiasm was not translated into votes.

Of course, there were mitigating reasons for failing to have caused any significant vote swing to the opposition, such as massive bribery by BN by showering millions of ringgit worth of material benefits on the electorate and the fact that Malays could not be persuaded to support DAP in such a brief encounter. Still, the issue of the Anwar factor remains unanswered.

Crucial choice ahead

For this reason, the Ijok election - where Anwar is expected to campaign full time for a PKR candidate - will be intensely watched by all at home and abroad to gauge the Anwar effect.

A convincing PKR victory would re-establish Anwar's star status and make him a magnet for the international and local media. This will increase opposition news exposure and help

propagation of the reform movement. The fastening pace of reform campaign will in turn lead to greater electoral support.

If PKR fails, Anwar's ability to rally mass support will continue to be doubted and the opposition will have missed a vital morale-booster.

It is therefore crucial not only to PKR, but to the entire opposition that PKR must win. This is particularly so when PKR only lost the seat by a small margin of 9 percent in the 2004 election.

With that in mind, the paramount consideration in the choice of candidate must be that the chosen one should be the one most likely to win, irrespective of racial or religious background.

PKR national treasurer Khalid Ibrahim has been proposed as a possible candidate. He is a good choice for the following reasons:

1. He was a well known corporate leader whose integrity and capability were highly regarded, having served with distinction as the chief executive of Permodalan Nasional Bhd and the Guthrie conglomerate. With his excellent service record and good standing in society, he should find easy acceptance to the electorate.

If elected, his reputation as a capable economic manager should lift the image of the opposition. At the moment, there is still considerable scepticism about whether there is enough talent in the opposition to move the country forward economically.

2. The constituency of Ijok comprises of 51 percent Malays, 28 percent Indians and 21 percent Chinese. Keeping in mind that most of the electorate in this country still tends to be guided by racial consideration, thanks to decades of the Umno policy of racial compartmentalisation, a Malay candidate would stand a better chance, all other factors being equal. This is sheer pragmatism, not racial bigotry.

There have been suggestions to field an Indian candidate, possibly in view of the unusually large presence of Indians in Ijok. This would have been a good suggestion in a less crucial by-election or during a general election when many seats are up for contest; but for such a crucial by-election as Ijok, too much is at stake, if PKR does not put up the most winnable candidate.

Rise above parochialism

Another important consideration is that Anwar and PKR are advocating the abolition of the much-abused NEP, which has been a major cause of disunity and retardation, and is now a threat to national survival in the context of rapid globalisation. Although its removal is long overdue, many Malays still hold it as sacrosanct, thanks again to Umno indoctrination. It would take immense courage for a Malay leader to call for the abandonment of this sacred cow.

PKR is undoubtedly treading into untested territory and the path ahead is fraught with risks. In fact, it is a measure of Anwar's high adherence to principles that he has chosen such a challenging and risky path. It will certainly take great leadership and enormous persuasive power to overcome the anticipated resistance.

Under these circumstances, it would be difficult to win with a Malay candidate and it will be doubly difficult if PKR fields a non-Malay candidate.

If PKR wins in Ijok, it will be a great encouragement not only to Anwar to soldier on with this arduous task, but also to the entire opposition front to continue to toil for total reform. Politics is the art of turning the impossible into the possible.

Even if the opposition fails to take over the reins of federal government in the coming general election, significant inroads into Parliament and electoral success in certain states may be sufficient to check the unrelenting decline of the state of this country, and trigger disintegration of the long decadent and obsolete BN.

When genuine reform take place as a result of the opposition's relentless struggle, all races will benefit. In fact, a return to democratic and constitutional rule - as opposed to the present pseudo democracy where the constitution is freely transgressed - is the best guarantee of minority rights.

For that day to come, citizens of all races must place national interests above parochial interests including those relating to political parties and races. It is only when all parties accept this as the guiding principle in their political struggles that the opposition stands the best chance to achieve its reform objectives.

It is within this context that I appeal to the leaders of PKR to make a wise choice of candidate for the Ijok by-election, and to all other opposition parties to respect that choice.

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