Ezam: PM must prove himself by next GE
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Mohamad Ezam Md Nor has given Abdullah Ahmad Badawi a deadline - by the next general election - to prove he is sincere about pursuing a reform agenda for Umno.
MCPX

In an interview with Malaysiakini today, the former PKR Youth chief said the prime minister must initiate clear signs that reforms will happen or else he will lose his support.

ezam joins back umno 280508Ezam, expelled by Umno in 1998, submitted his lifetime membership form to Abdullah on Monday on grounds he was attracted to the latter's anti-graft agenda.

In this first of a two-part interview, Ezam speaks about the history behind meeting Umno leaders back in 2004, why he has no loyalty to anybody and the reasons why Umno appeals to him again.

Can you tell us the real story on how you joined Umno?

There is a huge difference with what is being said about me meeting Umno leaders before the recent general election and the one before the 2004 election on my decision to join Umno.

In 1999, after I was arrested under ISA (Internal Security Act), there were no efforts to pull me back into Umno. Later, there were attempts to get me to leave PKR and join Umno. I rejected it at that time. My principle was that I will not make a deal while I am still in prison.

I was released in 2003 and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became prime minister. He is different from Dr Mahathir (Mohamad). Mahathir's approach is to pressure - where by the more you fight him, the more he will pressure you. But Abdullah's approach is to pull. That is why during the 2004 election, there were attempts to pull me back to Umno.

anwar hadi awang harun din germany 140904 gesturingI saw that as an opportunity then to deal for Anwar Ibrahim's freedom, at least to allow him to seek medical treatment overseas.

At that time, Anwar was in critical condition. After discussing with other party members, they felt that priority must be given to save Anwar's life. So we decided to initiate discussions with Umno leaders.

Those I met included Dr Mohd Khir Toyo, Muhammad Muhd Taib (both former Selangor MBs) and Abdul Aziz Shamsuddin (former minister). This was carried out with Anwar's knowledge.

In my second meeting with Khir Toyo, Anwar told me to bring along PKR leaders to the discussion as witnesses - Kamarul Baharin Abbas, Abdul Rahman Osman and Johari Abdul. Four of us went to meet Khir Toyo and I led the discussions. This was all before the 2004 general election.

So we met at Khir Toyo's house and our stand was any deal must start with freeing Anwar, at least to get him medical treatment. When Khir Toyo could not commit, we backed out. He told us to contest and join the party but we said 'no'. We are not interested in what we will get. Our focus was clear.

Then we met with Aziz with 12 other people and the same thing happened. He could not commit so I ended the conversation there. Some friends carried on the negotiations and joined Umno but I can understand that those were tough days and they had financial problems. I could not stop them but we're still friends. I don't see that as a form of betrayal.

After the 2004 election, Anwar's health got worse. BN won big and Dr Wan Azizah (Wan Ismail) then asked me to work on getting Anwar out and to open negotiations. We tried all sorts of ways. I met with Rahmah Osman (former deputy minister) who was then close to Abdullah and who was sympathetic to us. We sent a group of people to see the Muslim muftis (clerics) and Umno leaders close to the PM but the message did not reach him.

One day, a foreign reporter told me, 'if you want to get to the PM, you get Khairy (Jamaluddin)'. I didn't know Khairy. I must put this on record since there are so many allegations about me and him. This was about May or June 2004. So I tried to find Khairy through contacts in London and in the end I got it and I met him. That's where my relationship with Khairy started.

I told him about our concerns for Anwar's health and to pass this message to PM. After two meetings, he arranged a meeting between Wan Azizah and PM at PM's office. I don't know the details as I did not go in but it was basically about Anwar's health. The first concern was to put Anwar permanently in hospital because at that time he was being tranferred in and out of prison.

Right then, Abdullah picked up the phone, called the health minister and ordered to take Anwar out on the spot. We also asked for Anwar to receive overseas treatment but he was non-committal about that. Then lastly, we asked Abdullah not to interfere with Anwar's trial unlike Mahathir. He gave his commitment not to interfere with the trial.

anwar khairy 150807I still met with Khairy after that to get Anwar overseas medical treatment. Khairy tried and there was an agreement to send Anwar for treatment in Singapore instead of Germany.

At first Wan Azizah did not agree, but when I met Anwar, he said 'okay'. According to Khairy, Abdullah agreed to this but the attorney-general challenged that it was against the provisions of the laws. So it did not materialise.

After a while, the court fixed a date for the appeal so we ceased discussions until the judgment. As it turned out, Anwar was released so as a courtesy I told Khairy about it and he asked if there was anything else he could do. I asked Anwar and Anwar said he wanted his passport back. So I told Khairy, and that night alone, Khairy came over to Anwar's house with the passport. So that was the incident when Khairy visited Anwar's house.

I want to stress - the entire process was about saving Anwar's life, not about any deal. I thought Anwar would come to my defence when people linked me to Khairy because they all knew. In fact, I rejected all offers and remained steadfast to get Anwar out. After Anwar was free, there were no more dealings. I did not meet Khairy again. In fact, he was afraid to see me because he was suffering from fierce criticisms at that time. We ceased our

relationship.

ezam interview 310508 5In 2005, I had problems with the party and I started to distant myself from the party and set up Gerak (People's Anti-Corruption Movement). There was no deal until this general election in March.

Before this, friends tried to get me back into Umno but I rejected them all. Friends from PAS sincerely wanted me to contest in a safe seat in Kelantan but I rejected that too. Why? Because I was focused on reforms.

In 2008, there were invitation for me to run but I rejected those offers because I did not see any reforms in Umno worth joining back. At that time, I felt I was pushing for reforms more effectively through civil society with Gerak.

After the new election tsunami, efforts were made by Abdullah and that is a significant move for reforms on the judiciary and corruption. I said these reforms are fundamental and I'm confident that it will open up the space and that's why they arranged a meeting between me and Abdullah about a month ago.

If you want to call it a deal then, that's the first deal to join Umno. After a two-hour meeting, I truly believe he is committed to reforms and he asked me to join Umno. It took me a week to discuss and talk it over with friends and family, so I made my decision in the end to join Umno.

What level do you think you need to be in the party or cabinet position to execute the reforms?

I don't have any plans or ambition to contest for any post because I am focused on how I can help with reforms. I did not ask Abdullah for anything. All I ask is that I want to be given a position that allows me to strengthen reforms. But so far I have no plans and there are no clear offers from Abdullah or Najib to me, whether in the party or the government.

If Abdullah's reforms do not take of, as proven by his track record in the past like the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC) and the judiciary, what will you do then?

I want to stress this, though it would be very controversial - I have no loyalty to any party or individual. My loyalty and commitment is to the idea of reform because this was taught by our great fighters and prophets. I support Umno because of those reforms and if reforms fail to happen, I will retract my support and make a different decision.

So you believe that Abdullah is truly sincere in fulfilling his commitment to free the ACA and the judiciary?

ezam interview 310508 1We never really know what people's intentions are. People ask why don't I just commit with the opposition who say the same reforms.

In the past, we did not have a choice because only the opposition spoke about reforms. The government did not say anything about this. Now the government has (a reform agenda). To choose between reforms by those with power is not because of the power itself, but its effectiveness.

Do you still believe in Abdullah's reforms if he says the ACA will be independent but Nazri

Abdul Aziz says that it should not be placed under Parliament?

I am also worried and I have expressed this to Abdullah. He said he is still waiting for the full report from ACA and he remains steadfast that ACA must be free because he knows that if it fails, he will be criticised even worse. He really understands that and to him, it's nothing less than making it independent.

Was this a condition - for you to be in Umno so he would initiate reforms?

No. He feels that I would play a more effective role if I were in Umno. It was not easy to leave civil society and step back into politics. I saw a need for a strong element within the party to push for this because people on the outside will always be skeptical.

When Wan Azizah said she was surprised (that I rejoined Umno), I was surprised (too) because Anwar did the same thing when he joined Umno. He criticised the government, went to jail and then joined Umno.

But there is a difference between me joining Umno now than Anwar joining Umno previously. This is because Umno today has a better reform agenda than when Anwar was in Umno. When Anwar joined Umno, he had no commitment for an independent judiciary or ACA. I am joining Umno that is more committed to reforms than before. From that reform angle, my decision makes more sense than Anwar's.

ezam interview 310508 4Do you have a deadline as to when Abdullah must prove he is sincere with his reforms?

I think it's not only my deadline but the people's deadline, I think it's just before the next general election the latest. There must be at least clear signs that these reforms will really happen.

If not, not just me but the entire country and voters will retract their support. Reforms must shape by then because otherwise, it would be meaningless. This is his responsibility.

Do you think you are being 'used' to prop up Abdullah's weakening reputation within the party?

I rejoined Umno on the ground of reforms and not (based) on the individual. If it is the individual I would not join now. I would have joined in 2004 when Abdullah was still strong. People who join parties when the leader is strong always harbour political motives but I'm not like that. I am pro-truth, not pro-winner.

It is not whether Abdullah is the winner or loser, it is whether he is honest about his reforms and efforts. This is the same when I supported Anwar when he was in prison. He was not a winner, he was a loser. It was because I believed in him then. I want to keep on moving even if Abdullah is facing pressures from all quarters. My concern is on reforms.

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