

**Zaid needs Pakatan, Pakatan needs Zaid**  
**Ong Kian Ming**  
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One of the main challenges which PKR and to a certain extent, Pakatan Rakyat as a whole has been and is still facing, after the historic general election results in March 2008, is a second credible and respected Malay leader who can represent PKR and Pakatan at the national level. There is currently such a leader out there whom PKR and Pakatan should recruit to join its ranks.

The incentive which PKR and Pakatan can and should use to 'entice' this Malay leader to join the opposition ranks on an official capacity is the Kelana Jaya parliamentary seat. And for this reason, it makes political sense for the current MP for Kelana Jaya, Loh Gwo Burne, to step down and make way for Zaid Ibrahim to contest under the PKR ticket in a by-election.

It is not hard to see why Zaid would make a very strong addition to the leadership ranks of the Pakatan coalition. He is already seen as somewhat of an 'opposition' figure after he was ignominiously sacked from Umno. He was prominent in campaigning for the opposition in the recent Kuala Terengganu by-election. He could easily step into the role of playing an able deputy to Anwar Ibrahim, not just within PKR but also on behalf of the Pakatan coalition.

In many ways, Zaid is a more suitable candidate to fill the shoes of Anwar's deputy than any of the current Malay leaders within PKR and as well as within Pakatan. Dr Syed Husin Ali has long struggled for the cause of justice and freedom in the opposition ranks but because of his leadership history in PRM, he does not have the same kind of respect and credibility among the Malay community. Khalid Ibrahim is a relative newcomer to the political scene and he is too caught up with his duties as MB of Selangor to effectively represent PKR in parliament or at the national stage.

Abdul Hadi Awang's role as president of PAS has actually been more detrimental than helpful to Pakatan's solidarity and public image because of his constant calls for greater cooperation between PAS and Umno and now, between Pakatan and BN. If not for the fact that Nik Abdul Aziz is 'checking' Hadi's aspirations to work more closely with Umno, PAS' position within Pakatan would be in some doubt. Unfortunately for Pakatan, Nik Aziz is not at a stage of his political career where he is mobile enough to be an effective spokesperson for Pakatan at the national stage.

**Tailor-made for the position**

Zaid's history as a political and corporate leader almost makes him tailor-made for the position of Anwar's deputy. He built his law firm into one of the largest practices in Malaysia. He has the experience of representing the Kota Bahru constituency in parliament.

His charity work to help the disabled in Kelantan made him very popular among the Malay voters in his constituency as well as in the state. He was appointed as the de facto law minister in Pak Lah's cabinet after 2008 despite not being allowed to defend his Kota Bahru seat. He has not been in Umno long enough to be tainted by the smear of money politics and he took the

principled stand of resigning his cabinet position after the ISA arrests of DAP MP Teresa Kok, blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin and journalist Tan Hoon Cheng.

His 'CV' makes him appealing to voters of different stripes – those who respect a self-made businessman and entrepreneur, those who like his charity work, those Umno supporters who would have liked to see reforms within Umno, those who appreciate his courage to step down from his cabinet position. In other words, his appeal is very similar to Anwar's in that he can appeal to Malays as well as non-Malay from different walks of life and backgrounds.

Given that Zaid has almost no possibility of rejoining Umno nor would he want to make that move, one wonders why he has not made the move of officially joining the opposition. It could be that he is still fielding 'offers' from all three opposition parties to see what each party can offer him in exchange for his membership. This is only to be expected given that Zaid's 'value', so to speak, is highest when he has not made a public declaration to join a certain party. But it is easy to see why PKR would be the best fit for him and why he would be the best fit for PKR.

DAP could do with a Malay leader of Zaid's stature but DAP is ultimately still a non-Malay led party which means that Zaid's influence in this party, practically speaking, will be limited. PAS could also use Zaid's experience and leadership but again, it remains to be seen if the more conservative grassroots members in PAS would be eager to accept Zaid's leadership within the upper echelons of the party especially given his views on religious freedom in Malaysia.

Zaid is then left with PKR. Because PKR is still a relatively young party, it would not ruffle too many feathers if Zaid were to be catapulted to the upper echelons of party leadership. Perhaps a special position could be created for Zaid to fill or he could be named as co-deputy president with Syed Husin.

Ideologically, Zaid's views represent many of the things which Anwar has pushed for in his capacity as the leader of Pakatan. He hits all the right notes in his book *'In Good Faith'* where he talks about reforming the judiciary, embracing pluralism, liberating the Malays, the protection of human rights, just to name a few topics covered in this volume (full disclosure: I conducted one of the interviews with Zaid for one of the chapters in this book).

This is not to say that there are no complications associated with Zaid joining the ranks of the opposition. First and foremost, Anwar has to be comfortable with sharing some of the spotlight with another capable and popular Malay leader within his own party. But Anwar has no reason to feel threatened given that he is widely recognized as PKR and Pakatan's leader and PM-in-waiting.

### **Needs to become a MP**

Secondly, Zaid needs to be 'eased' into the party with a minimal ruffling of feathers on the part of other PKR leaders including Syed Husin. Thirdly, Zaid needs to be 'legitimised' before joining the ranks of the opposition leadership. To achieve this, Zaid needs to become a MP first.



PKR has a limited number of leadership choices in Sarawak and Sabah because it has only one state representative in East Malaysia (Dominic Ng in Sarawak) which explains why Jeffrey Kintingan was made a PKR vice president representing the interests of East Malaysia. The same cannot be said of PKR in Peninsular Malaysia. If Zaid were to join PKR, he needs to be at least at the level of a MP, a position shared by many other PKR leaders in Peninsular Malaysia. It is not that difficult for Zaid to be 'made' a MP. All that is needed is for a current PKR MP to step down and pave the way for a by-election where it is almost guaranteed that Zaid would win, if he were the candidate.

Such a seat is actually available. It is relatively well known that the MP for Kelana Jaya Loh (whose only claim to fame was that he recorded the infamous VK Lingam tape) did not expect to win this seat and may be tiring of his role as a MP. It presumably would not take too much to convince Loh to resign to pave the way for Zaid to contest in this mixed seat (42% Malay, 39% Chinese, 18% Indian, 1% Others), which he would almost certainly win with a bigger majority than the 5,130 votes achieved by Loh in the 2008 general election.

Right now, the opposition's attention is focused on the upcoming by-elections on April 7 in Bukit Selambau, Bukit Gantang and Batang Ai. After these by-elections, Pakatan will need to deal with the issue of Elizabeth Wong's resignation. If her resignation is accepted by Khalid Ibrahim, then an argument can be made for Loh to resign his position as MP as well so that these two by-elections can be held at the same time in Selangor.

If this were to occur, Zaid would provide a much needed boost to the public image of PKR. If he does become the next MP for Kelana Jaya, he will have to deal with the nitty gritty of party politics within PKR and Pakatan but that is part and parcel of politics in Malaysia. The positives which Zaid brings to the table would easily outweigh any cons that may be associated with Zaid because of his history as an Umno politician and corporate leader. At this critical juncture in Malaysian politics, Zaid needs PKR and Pakatan and PKR and Pakatan need Zaid.

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