

Why Anwar is keeping Zaid out of the picture
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COMMENT The fact that Parti Keadilan Rakyat de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim favours vice-president Azmin Ali for the party's vacant deputy presidency is no great secret.

The WHY is not known to the public but more on that later. Suffice it to say that Anwar has even prepared the ground to ensure that Zaid Ibrahim, the PR co-ordinator and Azmin's challenger, would not be deputy president. . .if he can help it.

So, it comes as no surprise that Azmin should turn up in Kota Kinabalu on Malaysia Day, Sept 16, at the same time as Anwar and "offer himself" – Malay style - for the deputy presidency. It could not have been any other way.

There was a reason to announce himself in Sabah. This is a state that has rejected him in no uncertain terms, not once but thrice, since from before the spectacular failure of the Sept 16 2008 Opposition plan to seize the reins of power in Putrajaya.

Anwar turned up in KK, despite being told by vice president Jeffrey Gopari Kitingan not to come, for the second time in recent weeks. The Sabah chapter was busy with the Malaysia Day celebrations in Keningau and he, known for paying mere lip service to Sabah and Sarawak rights, would just be getting in the way of a celebration which observers say he obviously wouldn't appreciate.

Anwar, meanwhile, tries to publicly project an image of studied neutrality. He's kidding no one least of all his wife and PKR president Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and daughter Nurul Izzah Anwar, the Lembah Pantai MP. This is the young woman who told the media that she sees no reason why she should sacrifice her hard-won parliamentary seat for her father. Finally, Wan Azizah resigned as MP in Permatang Pauh so that her husband could contest in his former seat.

Nurul Izzah has now told the media in Kuching on Malaysia Day that she will support Zaid for the deputy presidency. In the eyes of pundits, she virtually described Azmin as "a wolf garbed in sheep's clothing". No doubt the mother shares her sentiments on Azmin, if for nothing else but his closeness to Anwar. She's likely to hold her peace in public in order not to humiliate the husband.

Anwar is anything but neutral. He dispatched Michael Bong from Sarawak and David Yeoh from Johore to Kota Kinabalu on July 31 to plead with Sabahans that Azmin "be given a second chance".

Earlier, to pile on the pressure, Anwar and Azmin masterminded the issue of show cause letters dated July 23 to 12 key Sabah PKR leaders aligned with Jeffrey. The allegedly "trumped-up" charges on disciplinary grounds did not sit well with the Sabah strongman. The defiant message from him was that Zaid should lead the "Stop Azmin Now!" movement in PKR.

Azmin had been Sabah state chief for a brief two months last year. He took over from Anwar himself. He was given the boot after the Dusuns in particular accused him of promoting Umno's discredited ketuanan Melayu – Malay political supremacy – in Sabah through local proxies allegedly drawn from Muslim illegal immigrants. The local Muslims

cried foul as well over their marginalization.

Azmin for the deputy presidency is Anwar's preparation for the possibility that he may be jailed soon on sodomy charges. He has dismissed these as being trumped up - déjà vu? - by Umno in cahoots with his former aide Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan.

In the event of Anwar being jailed, pundits see a strategic move to hand Azmin the mandate to negotiate with Kelantan prince and Umno veteran Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, or Ku Li, on a possible marriage of convenience. In short, breathe new life into the Sept 16 2008 movement.

According to pundits, Ku Li could momentarily bask in the glow of being Prime Minister of a PR Plus federal government and Anwar would be out of jail in a jiffy.

Some observers think Zaid makes too much of being his own man and not being a team player, and in Anwar's estimation, cannot be relied on to be party to any plan to spring him out of jail.

Hence, suspicion is rife in the Azmin camp that Zaid is an "Umno plant" to destroy PR from within. However, those who know Zaid dismiss this theory, including Anwar.

How Azmin can be relied upon to pull off a renewed bid for power in Putrajaya is anyone's guess. It was Azmin who botched the Sept 16, 2008 plan, according to Jeffrey's people, after he took over the operation from the Sabahan vice president. It was Anwar's express instruction that Jeffrey hand over responsibility for the final touches to Azmin whom, he deemed, "should get the credit".

The final touches never came as the Sabah and Sarawak MPs were unhappy with the unceremonial manner in which Jeffrey was removed. They were also upset that Azmin, whom they did not trust, was drafted in instead as his replacement.

The MPs in Sabah and Sarawak held back just sufficiently for the BN to organize a "study tour" to Taiwan for MPs from the two states. Meanwhile, Saiful had allegedly exposed the plan and defected to Umno. Azmin has been blamed for the operation turning sour.

Azmin, given Anwar's overt and covert backing, is set to win the deputy presidency.

But still the unthinkable could happen with the non-Malays being solidly behind Zaid besides Sabah and Sarawak and the east coast states of Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang. Zaid could also pick up crucial Malay votes in Negri Sembilan, Malacca, Kedah and Penang.

Should Azmin be seen as staring at defeat, Anwar is likely to step in and propose that both his protégé and Zaid pull out from the contest in the interest of "party unity".

But first Anwar has to eat humble pie and personally appeal to his old friend, Syed Husin, to re-consider his decision not to offer himself again for the deputy presidency. Anwar has confidence that Syed Husin, "unlike Zaid", can hold the fort at PKR for him if he's carted off to jail soon.

Syed Husin, it is learnt, had wanted to go for one last term. However, he had hoped that Anwar would persuade him to stay on after he announced his decision to stay out of the fray. Also, he wanted to be returned unopposed. But Anwar kept an ominous silence. This seemed to indicate to Syed Husin that he should really go this time and let Azmin take over.

Should Zaid, sensing victory, refuse to pull out from the contest for the deputy presidency, he's likely to be hauled up before the Disciplinary Committee like the Sabah 12 and be eliminated from the scene. This would be on the grounds that he doesn't see the big picture that Anwar always claims to see. If Anwar holds back, it could only be if he realizes that the party would not allow him to get away with it.

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