

WHITHER KEADILAN?

Keadilan will be holding its second national congress from Dec 22 to Dec 24. We take a look at where the party is heading.

By **Habhajan Singh**

COME April 14, 2008, if all goes as planned, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (Keadilan) will be in high gear. Of course, this is more than two years away, equivalent to an eternity in politics.

By then, the party's adviser, former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, would be free to officially take over the party leadership. The laws will no longer bar him from holding political office. In the interim, Keadilan hopes to put in place a machinery effective enough to take on the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN).

Keadilan has big dreams. It not only wants to lead the Opposition front, but also taste power. The party hopes to transform the fragmented Opposition into a viable alternative to the BN in the next general election.

Keadilan wants to break the BN's monopoly on power. Being a Malay-led multi-racial party, and minus the religious hang-ups holding Pas back, Keadilan believes it is within striking distance of that dream. 'In the long run, we're the most viable party to lead the Opposition, and finally, lead it to the seat of power, which is the ultimate objective,' says Keadilan's Deputy President Dr Syed Husin Ali.

Coming from Syed Husin, this is news. During his earlier days in Opposition politics, he led the small-but-idealistic Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia (PSRM). They were a bunch of committed social activists who never really dreamed of actually



Syed Husin: We're the most viable party to lead the Opposition

Xavier: No way is Anwar rejoining Umno

running the country. In 2003, the party, which had by then dropped the 'socialist' tag, joined forces to form the present Keadilan.

Just like PSRM, the other Opposition players have failed in the past to project themselves as worthy alternatives to the BN. The Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Pas have long been struggling with their own limitations - DAP is predominantly Chinese and Pas, Malay.

Without a broader base or a well-oiled coalition, the Opposition can forget the idea of taking on the BN coalition led by Umno. On this score, Keadilan feels it can deliver. Reflecting on the heyday of the *Reformasi* movement in 1998 after Anwar's sacking from the government,

Keadilan's Deputy Secretary-General Dr Xavier Jayakumar says, 'That's when I realised that, if this man (Anwar) pulls it through, he can bring along with him a huge Malay middle-class.'

But the hope for instant success is a bit far-fetched. Keadilan must be prepared for the long haul.

Will it make the cut? When asked about Keadilan's future, one political analyst puts it that the party is losing its significance as a political party because it is becoming more like an NGO fighting for general lofty issues. 'Its main challenge today is to make itself publicly more relevant as a political party and not as a highly glorified NGO,' says Prof Datuk Dr Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Director of The Institute of the

Malay World and Civilisation at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

A spanner in the works

Of course, there are a couple of 'factors' that could spoil the April 2008 party.

First, you can expect Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to call for a snap election well before Anwar is free to participate in the electoral process.

Second, there is the prickly issue of what Anwar has up his sleeve. Will he really, really stick his neck out with Keadilan and the Opposition front? Or will he, as some political conjecture will have you believe, take the shorter route to Putrajaya by rejoining Umno?

Privately, a small number of Keadilan

leaders have been frank enough to state that they would quit Keadilan if Anwar ditches the party. But a good number in the top leadership are convinced that he will rough it out with his newfound comrades. They argue that his six-year incarceration has truly changed him.

Xavier is convinced that Keadilan is not Anwar's sojourn. 'We had asked him point blank at one SC meeting. He told us that there's no way he's rejoining Umno,' he recounts. The meeting is usually presided by Anwar's wife and party president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

Lawyer Sivarasa Rasiah, a Keadilan vice-president, puts it succinctly: 'He's the guy around whom everything happens.' Will he leave Keadilan? Sivarasa dismisses it.

president who had wanted to open Umno's door to all Malaysians.

Keadilan today

Of late, whenever in the country, Anwar has been spending a good portion of his time strengthening the party and uniting the hopelessly disunited Opposition parties. On every trip home from Washington, where he is teaching, Anwar's normal day is packed with a four-programme agenda. It begins with a meeting with party members, followed by a meeting with the non-Malays, then a dialogue with other parties and a *ceramah* in the evenings.

Certainly, this has boosted the spirit of Keadilan party members.

As it prepares for its second national

now in practically every state, with a full-time organising secretary.'

This interview was conducted at the party's new headquarters in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur. A short distance from Plaza Sentral, the new headquarters, in a way, reflects Keadilan's newfound zeal since Anwar's release in November 2004.

Opposition front

With its newfound zeal and the infusion of experienced cadres from the earlier merger, Keadilan today should not be dismissed lightly. The earlier *Reformasi* movers and shakers were Anwar sympathisers, predominantly young and brash. The merger gave Keadilan leaders years of hardened political experience.

It is understood that Keadilan has forged a roadmap up to 2008. Over the last few months, Keadilan, DAP and Pas have been meeting in Port Dickson to pave the way for some kind of electoral arrangement for the next general election. This is an integral part of the roadmap. 'We will identify candidates 12 months ahead to give them a chance to work in the area. You cannot work a miracle in seven days,' says Xavier, referring to the usual short campaigning period and lack of resources.

On the electoral front, there is still some ground to be covered, with DAP and Pas at odds on the Islamic state issue. 'I think an electoral pact will work better than an Opposition front,' adds Xavier.

During the recent Pengkalan Pasir by-election in Kelantan, DAP was nowhere to be seen. On the other hand, Keadilan leaders were down in full force assisting Pas in campaigning against the Umno candidate.

At his *ceramah*, Anwar was certainly a crowd-puller. Estimates range from 10,000 to 20,000. In the end, however, the BN candidate emerged victorious with a majority of 134 votes. But Anwar's presence was not enough to swing the outcome. Some suggest that had he stayed longer, things would have been different.

Is that the case? Can the Anwar magic and charm alone be enough to turn the tide in the local political scene?

How the Opposition parties respond to Anwar's overtures in the months to come will determine, to some extent, their collective fate. **mb**



Sivarasa: Anwar is the guy around whom everything happens

Mustafa: Unfair to compare Keadilan with Semangat 46

On this score, some note the case of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. Following Umno's deregistration in 1988, the Kelantan prince formed Semangat 46, which he later disbanded, with its members rejoining Umno. But this is not a fair comparison, argues Keadilan Vice-President Mustafa Kamil Ayub. To begin with, Semangat 46 was made up of almost totally Umno splinters. 'We only have 30%-40% of former Umno members. We're talking about our commitment to a new social contract for Malaysia. Semangat 46 had then claimed to be more Malay than Umno. We are experimenting with a new form of politics in Malaysia. It's multi-racial, something tried by Onn Jaafar,' he says, drawing attention to Umno's first

congress on Dec 22-24, Keadilan today claims a membership of about 110,000 members, with some 85% of them being Malay. The largest concentration of members is in the Klang Valley, followed by Kelantan and Perak.

On the ground, party leaders say, the Keadilan wheels are turning. True, you hardly hear of Keadilan in the mainstream media, except for the occasional winning or losing of a court case. But this is not to be mistaken for a party deep in slumber. 'We are strengthening our organisation and political understanding to play a more effective role in the country's political scene,' Syed Husin tells *Malaysian Business*. 'Our concentration now is to strengthen our states and divisions. We are