

Search for votes hinges on party unity

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THE good news for Keadilan is that its adviser Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is a well-known figure, especially in the international arena. The sad reality, however, is that the party has only one Parliamentary seat and a state seat won in Sarawak's May 20 polls.

The party talked about winning elections or capturing certain states in front of enthusiastic delegates at its congress in Penang on Sept 2.

But the party is not even sure about the role of Anwar. Party president Datin Seri Wan Azizah Ismail, also Anwar's wife, insists that Keadilan's prospects in the next general election are promising because Anwar is now more actively involved. She believes Anwar has the ability to lead and unite the opposition.

"Our rallies are drawing larger crowds, especially when Anwar Ibrahim is one of the speakers," she said at the congress.

But Youth leader Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor is trying to downplay Anwar's role: "We support reform not because of an individual. We sided with Anwar when he was attacked by (Tun Dr) Mahathir Mohamad because it was the interest of people at large."

Even so, Ezam could not escape Anwar's shadow. A day before the congress, he declared at the Youth wing's meeting that Anwar's record and commitment to people would be the basis of garnering support for the party.

While Anwar remains a symbol of hope for the party, Keadilan leaders are also banking on Umno's current problems to gain advantage.

Wan Azizah says continuing problems within Umno and the allegedly ailing economy will help the party to gain support.

The challenge, however, is to have commitment and discipline. It is after all a small party with little history.

Deputy president Syed Husin Ali was quite frank in front of some 1,000 delegates and observers at the Youth and Women's meetings when he admitted that the party's organisational structure was not as strong as it should be.

Commitment and determination of leaders and members should be strengthened, while discipline should be improved. There also appears to be a lack of political awareness among members and the party is plagued by a depleting pool of activists and funds.

Some divisions have Women's and Youth wings but these are inactive and have not held annual general meetings. Some Women's and Youth wings at divisional level do not have a close relationship with the central wing; in some cases, there is no communication between them.

"Worse still, there is a tendency to sulk and resort to boycotts whenever there is a difference of opinion. Sometimes this has to do with the style of leadership and management," said Syed Husin.

With such serious problems, it is difficult to imagine Keadilan's grand dream of capturing Penang in the next general election. Some of them may have forgotten that DAP tried three times before calling it quits. Penang is also Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's home state.

Maybe it was just a rallying cry to boost the weakening spirit of some members. It was Anwar who declared Penang a

frontline state for the party at the close of the party's congress on Sept 3.

But one thing is true about the party. It works hard to bring in new members. Anwar's close friend Datuk Nalla Karuppan has joined the party, allegedly bringing some 2,500 former MIC supporters with him. There are also attempts to draw a few former leaders from MCA and Gerakan.

Corporate figures such as Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim, the new party treasurer, have also signed up.

This is the man who would assist Anwar to propagate the party's new economic vision: A market economy to replace the New Economic Policy (NEP) and its successors, says former Keadilan information chief Khalid Jaafar, who is the Bukit Katil division chief.

"Khalid is the right person for the job. Many will remember him as one of the main proponents of the NEP. You couldn't get a better person than the man who was involved with the implementation of the NEP," he says.

To abolish the NEP-based agenda is almost an impossible task. Not only Umno, but Islamist Pas too would object to it. The Malays see the policy as a symbol of protection.

Anwar has insisted, however, that there must be a stop

to giving preferential treatment to the Malays and the focus instead should be on new, non-discriminatory practices to propel growth for all Malaysians.

It may sound ideal to say NEP-like policies only benefit the rich and continue to neglect poor Malays but this delicate issue may not bode well with the Malay community.

Researcher Amir Sari agrees that questioning the NEP will generate hostility, yet it is one of those painful tasks the party has to do if it wants to become a truly multiracial party, which provides equal opportunity for all.

"Affirmative action has overstayed its welcome in this country. We need an open market with opportunities for all Malaysians and to discard any race-based policies that would only continue to cripple the Malays and thwart their true potential," says the Keadilan-linked Policy Research Institute political co-ordinator.

This mammoth task also goes directly against Umno's commitment to revitalise the Malay economic agenda. It would be tough for any party, especially Malay-based organisations, to go against the grain.

Keadilan is going to face an uphill battle in the next general election. With weaknesses in party organisation and discipline, the problem is further exacerbated by negotiations for seats among "friends" such as Pas and DAP.

But vice-president Azmin Ali is optimistic. He says the party will continue to convince Pas and DAP to form an electoral pact and fight for a common cause.

"We want to ensure there are no overlapping seats. This formula is workable and acceptable by voters. At the same time, we will strengthen Keadilan," he says.

Some political analysts say Keadilan could, at best, win a few more seats. And voters who are inclined towards the opposition are expected to continue voting based on race and religion.