

Is PKR heading the way of Semangat 46?

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The unhappy exit of Ezam Mohd Noor from Parti Keadilan Rakyat follows other recent acrimonious departures of a number of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's key associates. It all points to a party in the throes of a crisis, writes ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD

BEING a young political party is perhaps a good enough explanation of why numerous key stalwarts have left what is now known as Parti Keadilan Rakyat. Formed four years ago, in a merger of Parti Keadilan Nasional and Parti Rakyat Malaysia, PKR has members of varying political outlooks, which perhaps accounted for much of the party's early internal turbulence.

There was Keadilan vice-president Marina Yusoff, who left in 2000, followed by deputy president Dr Chandra Muzaffar the year after. Three years later, information chief Ruslan Kassim quit to join Umno.

Others, including former secretary-general Anwar Tahir, supreme council member Saari Sungib and vice-president Saifuddin Nasution Ismail, quietly withdrew into the background, and then left the party altogether.

The turnover list goes on. Each had his own reason, but things did seem to settle down after Keadilan merged with PRM to form PKR.

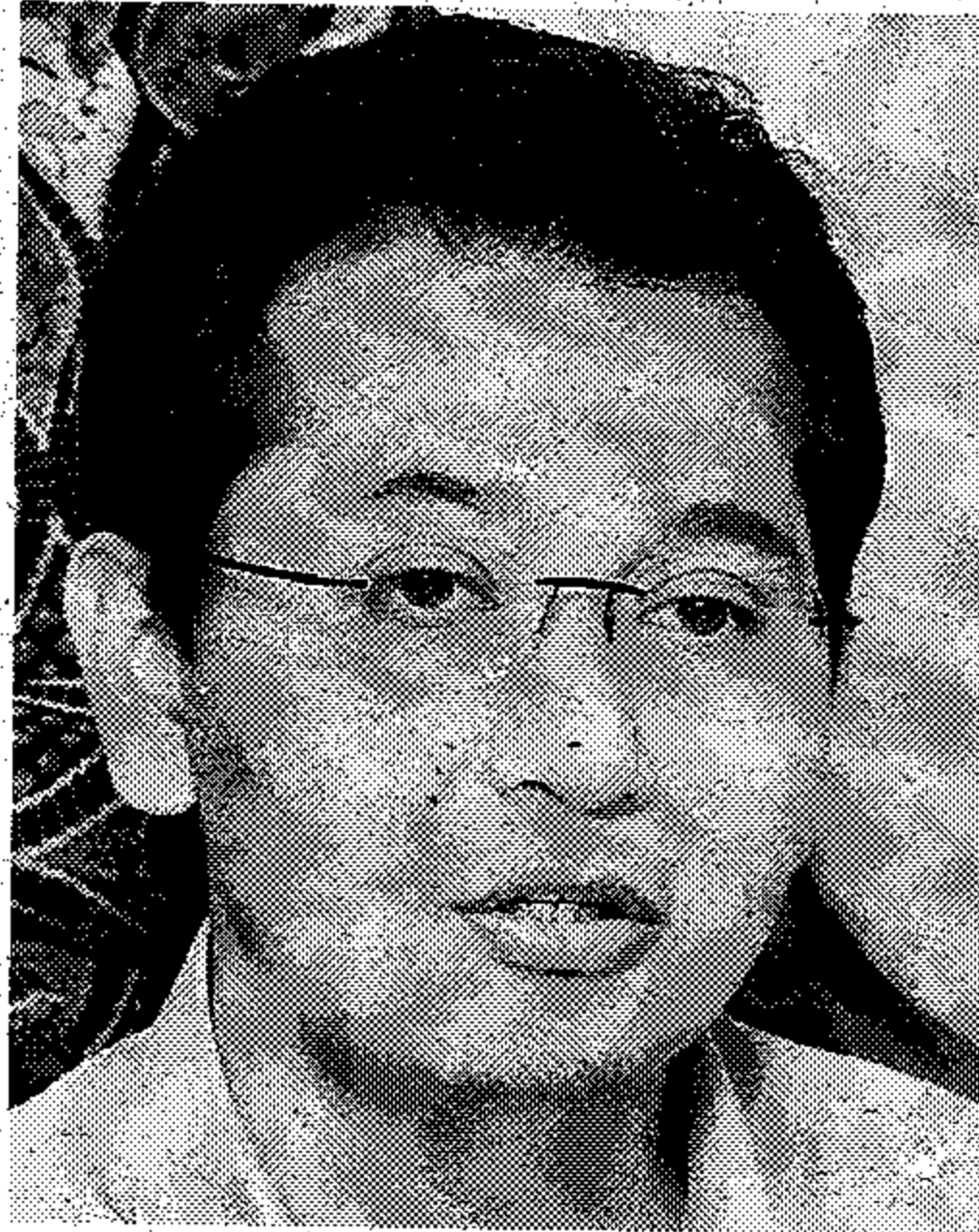
In the last two months, though, have come the dramatic exits of three more key personalities: Datuk S. Nallakaruppan, who left in May this year, followed by former Parti Keadilan Nasional deputy president Abdul Rahman Othman and former Youth chief Ezam Mohd Noor.

Unlike those who left the party earlier, the party leaders can't simply brush aside this trio's exit.

In the past, most who quit the party did so relatively amicably. Few spoke out publicly against PKR. This time, Nallakaruppan, Abdul Rahman and Ezam have all made public critical allegations on the way PKR is being run. All three also left after Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's release from prison in 2004, an event that should have galvanised the PKR. But the unthinkable happened the day Ezam — perhaps the staunchest Anwarista of them all, who had stuck to his political father like white on rice — quit.

What gives?

The current problem in PKR



Former PKR Youth chief Ezam Mohd Noor is critical of how the party is run

appears to stem from the now very public spat between Anwar's two closest proteges — Ezam and vice-president Azmin Ali. They've traded heated words in the media in recent days. Ezam went on to direct some of his ire at Anwar himself, telling Internet news website Malaysiakini that he no longer trusted Anwar's sincerity in consolidating the party, and accusing Anwar of being controlled by Azmin.

"The problem boils down to a clash between Ezam and Azmin," says opposition insider Mohd Sayuti Omar.

"Ezam feels he's not getting adequate attention from Anwar because Anwar listens too much to Azmin.

"Why this is so, when both of Anwar's *anak didik* were for so long so close to each other that people called them his 'Siamese Twins', is the real question."

Sayuti notes that this rivalry between two political siblings for their mentor's attention erupted into a no-holds-barred spat soon after Anwar's release after the Federal Court overturned his conviction on sexual misconduct. It was at that point that Ezam began pushing for a new approach in PKR following the slide in the party's performance.

The party won five parliamentary seats in 1999 but only one in the 2004 polls, when PKR president and Anwar's wife, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah

Wan Ismail, retained her Permatang Pau constituency.

"I suspect Ezam wanted PKR to reverse the slide in support by adopting a more flexible and less emotional approach to politics. Perhaps this came to be seen as a surrendering of principles and a strategy driven by a personal agenda, which could have led to this clash," says Sayuti.

Anwar, on his part, appeared hesitant and in a bind as to which of his two quarrelling proteges he should side with. That he's been leaning more towards Azmin created uneasiness not only for Ezam but several others in the party as well.

"This in part explains why Nalla and Abdul Rahman also left. It seems to be the 'Azmin factor'," adds Sayuti.

Anwar — Keadilan's first secretary-general — refuses to speak of PKR's problems, but fondly recalls Ezam's long association with the party.

He said that Ezam was one of the several critically important key Anwar lieutenants who fled to Indonesia after Anwar was sacked as deputy prime minister, while a small number of other core supporters, including him, stayed back to set up Keadilan.

"Only when the party was set up were they asked to return to take up the key leadership positions," says Anwar, who was recently appointed to Pas' central committee.

Abdul Rahman, who has applied to join Pas, also no longer wants to talk about what's wrong in his former party.

"I just wish PKR will remain strong. With the public now looking closely at the party, there's no point hiding whatever problems they have."

The question now is where Ezam will go. A longstanding rumour is that he'll rejoin Umno, where he once served as the Petaling Jaya Selatan deputy division chief.

Ezam has strongly rejected this in the past. But he recently seemed more open to the possibility, though adding that "friends" from Pas have also approached him.

Pas, incidentally, is where a

number of Anwar associates, including former PKR stalwarts Anwar, Saari, Saifuddin and Abdul Rahman, have ended up, though many of them still support Anwar.

Pas, on its part, is trying not to create the impression that it's actively encouraging immigration from PKR, as the parties are close partners.

Pas secretary-general Datuk Kamaruddin Jaafar, commenting on Abdul Rahman's application to join the party, says he personally wished that PKR could have sorted out the problem, "but it would not be right for me nor anyone in Pas to comment on another party's internal affairs".

"My concern is that there's too much overplaying of the fact that he is from PKR, and I don't want to create the impression that we're in any way sabotaging the party," adds Kamaruddin.

Indications are that Pas isn't about to interfere. A strong PKR is better to have as an ally than a fractured partner, especially as the next general election, due by 2009, is looming ever closer.

Still, many will wonder why a number of Anwar's "boys" from the former Umno and Malay grassroots faction are more comfortable in the Islam- and Malay-centric Pas, instead of the more "universal" and multi-racial PKR.

For Anwar, how well and how quickly he manages to settle these woes will have a direct bearing on the future of the party set up all but in his name.

At the least, it wouldn't look good for PKR to continue talking about wanting to contest 60 parliamentary seats in the next polls if it fails to put even its own house in order first. But the Ezam-Azmin spat, says Sayuti, has progressed to such an extent that it's now difficult even for Anwar to fully resolve.

"The phenomenon I'm seeing in PKR now leads me to believe that it's heading the way of Semangat 46," he said, referring to the short-lived Umno splinter party of the late 1980s.

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