

Anwar takes over the helm

Little storms are brewing within Parti Keadilan Rakyat as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim begins to take on a frontline role in preparation for the general election.

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INSIGHT
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ON the wall behind the desk of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's office is the famous photograph of him on a jet ski, crouched low over the speed machine as he sliced through the waters.

He looked young, dangerous and powerful. And he was all of that back then when he was poised on the threshold of power.

The former deputy prime minister will cross another sort of threshold soon – he turns 60 in August. But far from slowing down, he seems about to start on another high-speed trip along the political road.

Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), of which he is advisor, is due to hold elections in May and party members want him to take over from his wife as president.

This despite the fact that the Societies Act bars him from holding any party posts till April next year. And in spite of the fact that his notorious back problem seems to be recurring, so much so that the painkiller he has been taking sometimes causes his fingers to swell.

Party insiders think Anwar will have to eventually pull out because few see the Registrar of Societies bending the rules for him.

But as former party Youth chief Ezam Mohd Nor told people recently, it is crucial that Anwar is seen as making a serious bid for the top post.

And as part of the opposition, they also feel they don't have to *kowtow* to rules they think are unfair to them.

Besides, there has always been this niggling thought among those in the party that he still had an eye on returning to Umno.

His willingness to be the party president shows his commitment to the party because, as they like to say in PKR, Anwar is bigger than the party. Whether he makes it or not is another matter.

Ezam, strategic to the core, is said to have pushed hard for this in the months before falling out of favour and quitting his party posts recently.

In that sense, the party congress in May will be a declaration of sorts that Anwar is in PKR to stay and the team that is elected will lead the party into the general election.

But that does not mean all is rosy in the party which has not been in good organisational shape since the Abim (Malaysian Muslim Youth League) faction left en bloc.

Pragmatists in the party saw them as woolly-headed idealists but the Abim group had spearheaded the party's formation with their superb network, organising skills and moral direction.

Their idea of a "new politics" in 1999 struck a chord in those grown weary of the politics of the Mahathir years.

Anwar has asked the Abim group to return but wild horses would not drag them back.

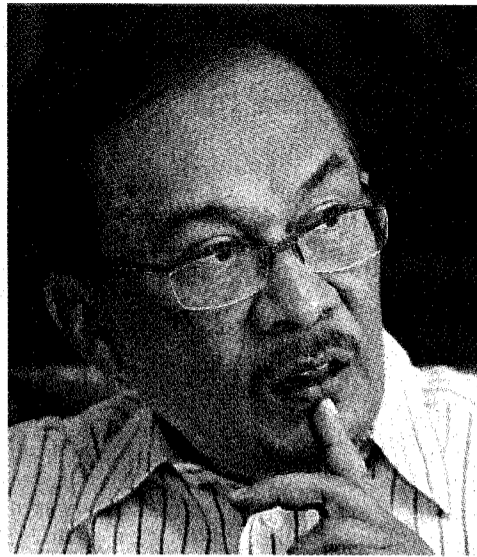
"Anwar is still our brother but politics is not our vocation," said an Abim figure and founding member of party.

According to information chief Tian Chua, many of the issues that had floated about in the last party polls had been settled.

"There was concern about whether the party would be more pluralistic or Islamic, whether Syed Husin Ali would fit in (as the No 2). I think these issues have been settled," he said.

Still, the merger with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) has not brought about any fantastic benefits.

Deputy president Dr Syed Husin Ali (formerly PRM president) provides a certain moral compass for the party but some com-



On the forefront: Will things in PKR be different now that Anwar is finally taking charge?

plain he is too rigid, uninspiring and has not wielded much clout. To compound matters, he had to keep a reduced schedule last year because of family commitments.

Until two weeks ago, it had seemed like there was going to be a head-on clash for the No. 2 post between incumbent Dr Syed Husin and current vice-president Azmin Ali.

Azmin has since pulled out – most think that Anwar finally put his foot down.

He was either trying to flex his muscles or to test his popularity on the ground but the number of nominations he managed to get suggests he is the man to watch, especially now that Ezam is out of the way.

He just might be the dark horse.

Azmin seems to be one of the controversial issues in the party.

He is said to be too powerful, too close to Anwar, too controlling and too ambitious. In short, they say he is "too much!"

Azmin has been blamed for Ezam's slide from the party hierarchy and had he taken on Dr Syed Husin for the No 2 post, he would have been painted as an even bigger villain.

"We are not asking Anwar to get rid of him, just to control him," said a party figure.

Some have even complained to Anwar about him.

Anwar told one complainant: "People criticise Azmin, they even ask me to sack him. But when I assign him to do something, he always gets it done. He delivers."

It has even been said that Ezam's chief frustration was not with Azmin but with Anwar's reluctance to check Azmin's action and behaviour.

The point is Azmin has been quite indispensable to Anwar from the days when he was Anwar's principle private secretary when the latter was still in government. They used to call him Anwar's "gatekeeper" because of the way he controlled access to Anwar.

"He has great personal loyalty to Anwar but he is also efficient, meticulous and a good organiser," said his old friend and former PKR information chief Khalid Jaafar.

The party's major weakness the last few years has been the lack of leadership.

It is amazing how Dr Wan Azizah has remained so well-liked despite doing so poorly as party president. Of late, she is spending such long hours praying at night that she sometimes nods off at meetings in the day.

Anwar understands politics and, unlike his wife, he is accepted as an equal among PAS and DAP leaders and can talk business with them.

He is internationally known, he is an orator and a showman and he knows how to use the media, as evident during his recent interview on Al-Jazeera. At opposition *ceramah*, he has been whetting the crowd's curiosity with outlandish and sensational theories of the Altantuya Shaaribu, the murdered Mongolian



Bitter exit: Ezam quit his posts because he was frustrated with Anwar's reluctance to act against Azmin

woman case.

Things are going to be quite different in PKR now that he is at the forefront.

But, said former secretary-general Anuar Tahir: "The general wants to organise his army but there may not be enough lieutenants to go on the ground."

Some supporters also want Anwar to stop harping so much on the years when he was in power.

"He should stop these constant references to his DPM days. People want to look ahead. They are not interested in what he used to do



The dark horse: Azmin has become a controversial figure in the party and is accused of being too powerful

but what he is going to do," said a close associate.

The outcome of the May congress will have bearing on the party's prospects in the general election. But it is the general election that will determine whether the party survives or fades away.

Few expect the party to do well but hope, as they say, beats eternal in the breast of men.

At this stage, party members are not even sure whether Anwar will be able to contest.

Regardless of whether he contests or is kept out, a great deal rests on his shoulders.