

Anwar sets stage for political role

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The former deputy prime minister's move to contest for Parti Keadilan Rakyat's presidency is a sign that he is positioning himself as a key opposition player in the next general election.

DATUK Seri Anwar Ibrahim was among the VIP guests at the launch of the new PAS headquarters in Kuala Lumpur on Monday.

Many of the PAS leaders around him were old friends whom he had known since their activist days in ABIM (Malaysian Muslim Youth League).

Anwar looked very polished and stood out in his striped shirt and grey suit in the midst of the more down-to-earth dressing of the PAS leaders.

But the irony of the situation could not have escaped him.

The former deputy prime minister is leading a struggling opposition party of his own whereas PAS has moved from a rural-based party to a major player with a RM7mil headquarters in the city centre.

Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) will hold its national congress in Seremban this weekend and delegates are set to elect him as their next president.

His election is likely to be as controversial as his nomination for the top post, given that his corruption conviction bars him from active politics till April next year.

Abdul Rahman Othman, a former treasurer and one of the three contenders for the post, has objected to Anwar's candidature.

That is why a third candidate, namely incumbent and Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, moved into the picture. She is there to make sure that Rahman does not get a walkover in the event of Anwar being disqualified before the polls.

If the Registrar of Societies disqualifies him after the contest, the party will appeal against the disqualification.

And, as information chief Tian Chua puts it, by the time it is all sorted out, it would be April, Anwar would be eligible and the party can meet again to re-elect him.

PKR may be a mosquito party but it is not without strategies.

Why is it so important for PKR to have Anwar at the top?

The party wants to send out a clear message that he is here to stay; that he is well and truly finished with Umno.

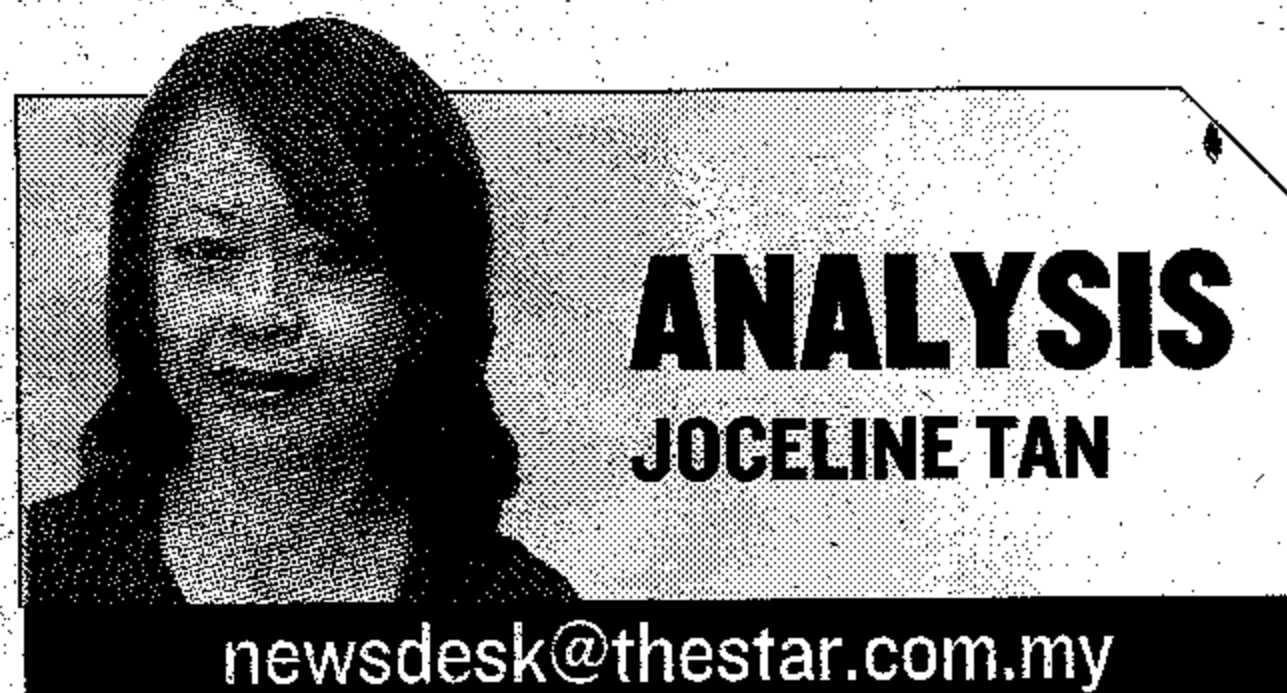
Anwar also needs to helm a party in order to position himself as a key player in the coming general election, to negotiate for seats and to have a say in the opposition's campaign strategy.

Many supporters were disappointed that Anwar had spent more time abroad than at home after his release. But he has been more home based this year and his leading role in the Ijok by-election gave the party a glimpse of what it was capable of.

"Ijok showed that we have a certain level of strength to give the ruling party a headache," said Youth chief, lawyer Shamsul Iskandar.

This congress, said Chua, will be focused on the general election.

"Anwar wants to bring in a team that can convince people he is serious about his oppo-



sition role rather than have a party comprising his friends and family," said Chua.

Anwar's daughter Nurul Izzah, the most political of his children, was nominated for a number of posts but he put his foot down on the matter knowing it would cause resentment in the party no matter how capable or qualified Nurul Izzah is.

Apparently that is also why Datuk K. Nallakaruppan, who calls Anwar "my good friend," is out of the vice-president contest.

Nallakaruppan said Anwar had called him last Friday asking him not to contest. Although he had secured the second highest number of nominations for the post, he promptly announced his withdrawal but not before slamming the phone down on Anwar.

Unless Nallakaruppan is made one of the two appointed vice-presidents, it looks like the two former tennis partners may soon be former good friends.

Almost all key posts are being contested.

Only deputy president Dr Syed Husin Ali and Wanita chief Zuraidah Kamaruddin won unopposed.

Syed Husin would have been challenged by rising star Azmin Ali had Anwar not stepped in to prevent a

contest even though Azmin is his blue-eyed boy.

But Azmin is one of six candidates for the vice-president post and he is expected to win together with cardiologist Dr Lee Boon Chye and former Wanita chief Fuziah Salleh.

This will be the most closely watched congress since the one following Anwar's release from prison.

Shamsul who is defending his Youth chief post has described the party's future as the "audacity of hope," a line borrowed from American Democratic candidate Barack Obama.

Few people really gave this party, set up to secure the release of Anwar, much of a chance. But it is still around, not doing fantastically, but taking shape nevertheless.

"Basically, PKR has all the symptoms of a small party struggling to cope against the odds. A great deal still rests on Anwar to define the party and its direction," said Merdeka Centre director Ibrahim Suffian.

But the real test will be the party's performance in the general election. That will be sailing in the open seas as opposed to a sail around the lake at the polls this Saturday.

So is Rahman intimidated about having to take on power-couple Anwar and Dr Wan Azizah?

"Not at all. They are nice people, especially Azizah; she is a fine lady," he said.

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