

Day of high drama at PKR congress

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Anwar's decision not to contest for president's post causes a stir

WHEN Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim strolled into the press area during coffee break, he was still defiant about becoming the next president of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR).

"Yes, I'm going for it. Who cares about the Registrar of Societies (ROS)?" he said.

It was the first day of the PKR congress. Party president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail had just delivered her policy speech and voting for the new leadership line-up was about to begin.

Asked if he was going to risk being an illegal president, Anwar mumbled something about his party lawyers having looked into the matter.

But his do-and-be-damned stance was just a stunt. Anwar had already decided not to take the risk.

As he left the press area, several party people, including lawyer Sivarasa Rasiah, surrounded him whispering furiously and pressuring him to change his mind.

"Anwar is very prone to thinking with his heart but I think this time his head will rule his heart," said Anwar's long-time friend Datuk Ravi Dharan.

When the congress reconvened after the break, Anwar was invited onstage to "make an announcement."

He related how ROS had notified him at 4.30pm on Friday that the party would be de-registered if he contested. He was pulling out because he was not prepared to sacrifice the party with the general election so close.

The hall erupted in dismay. Permanent chairman Ismaili Hishammudin had to give in to pressure that Anwar listen to views from the floor before reaching a final decision.

It was high drama and one delegate after another spoke, one of them almost breaking into tears.

The man at the centre of it all sat looking calmly over the tempest raging below.

He was rather casually dressed for such a big occasion. His *baju Melayu* top was worn loosely over his *kain sampang* and he had eschewed shoes for leather slippers. His bad back was acting up again for he walked with a slight limp.

They wanted him to contest but he had made up his mind. He would be their leader and Dr Wan Azizah their president.

And just as everyone thought



ANALYSIS
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that the high emotions had come to a close, Abdul Rahman Othman, the third contestant to the president's post, declared he was also withdrawing.

This time the hall exploded in a standing ovation. Within seconds, Rahman, ostracised following his bid for the top post, became a hero of sorts. Ismaili had tears in his eyes when he hugged and congratulated Rahman.

Rahman claimed it was a spontaneous act on his part after listening to Anwar's appeal, although he admitted later that he had "accidentally met" Anwar at a local hotel the previous night and they had chatted for an hour.

Journalists watching the turn of events wondered if there was anything at all spontaneous that morning. There had obviously been quite a bit of choreography behind the scenes.

Anwar and those close to him were well aware of the perils of challenging the ROS. The law is the law, even if one deems the law unjust.

But posturing Anwar as the potential president brought the supporters out in droves. And challenging the ROS gave the party a huge boost of morale.

There was, said one journalist, lots of shock and awe and, if P. Ramlee were still alive, he would have loved to make a movie out of it.

It was superb political strategy and the outpouring of emotions confirmed his standing in the party.

On top of all this, the ROS played an unwitting supporting role to the political melodrama.

Anwar had accused the ROS and the powers behind it of *silat* and *sandiwara* in blocking him at the eleventh hour but he was apparently not above his own brand of *silat* and *sandiwara*. It was Anwar at his Machiavellian best.

Dr Wan Azizah was the only one who did not seem rehearsed. She was truly the eye of the storm, still demure and sweet-tempered after so many years of rough-and-tumble opposition politics. And still stuck with a job she has never really wanted.