

by **Pauline Puah**
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

SEREMBAN: Parti Keadilan Rakyat's (PKR) biennial congress this year turned out to be a huge disappointment for many – for its adviser, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who had hoped to be elected president, and for the delegates, who had wanted the party to show that it is prepared for the next general election.

The focus of the three-day congress, which began on Friday, was clearly on Anwar, who is very much in control of the party set up in 1999 after he was removed as deputy prime minister.

On Saturday, when everyone expected Anwar to officially take over the helm from his wife, Datin Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, he dropped a bombshell that he would withdraw from the three-cornered race against Wan Azizah and former deputy president Abdul Rahman Othman, better known as ARO.

On the sidelines earlier, Anwar had told reporters he would not be cowed by the registrar of societies (ROS) into withdrawing from the contest. Under the Societies Act, Anwar is barred from active politics for five years until April next year because of his conviction for corruption. The registrar rejected his application for an exemption on Friday.

After a break, an hour following his announcement, when some 1,500 delegates were ready to cast their ballots, Anwar asked to explain his position to the party.

"I am ready to face any risks (by accepting the presidency) despite there being a threat (from the registrar) that I will be jailed for three years or fined

Keadilan disappointment

ANWAR DROPS WITHDRAWAL BOMBHELL, PARTY'S ABILITY TO FACE BN IN DOUBT

RM10,000 should I defy the decision by the ROS," he said to a round of 'reformasi' from the delegates.

No one expected what followed. "But now there is a problem. There is an implication and threat to the party. At the individual level, I am really to sacrifice, but for the party, I have to think (about my decision) carefully," Anwar said.

"I urge you all to support Wan Azizah. Choose her if you support my leadership. This was the most difficult decision in my life."

Throughout his speech, not once did he use the word "withdrawal".

Anwar's decision was said to have been made at the supreme council meeting at midnight before the election.

"Wan Azizah told the supreme council members she did not want her husband to take the risk of being put in jail again," one party insider said.

But not all were pleased with Anwar's decision, including information chief Tian Chua, who was absent from the meeting to attend a funeral in Malacca.

Visibly upset, Chua was overheard asking Anwar "How can you do this?"

after the announcement was made.

While Anwar listened to his supporters debate whether he should defy the ROS, delegates who were dismayed at his decision walked out.

"Wayang! Wayang! Siapa nak tengok wayang boleh masuk sekarang. Free! (Show! Show! Whoever wants to watch the show can enter now! Free!)," one delegate declared before walking out of the hall with about five others.

A last minute withdrawal by ARO from the presidency contest also raised eyebrows. Just three days earlier, he had challenged Anwar's legitimacy to contest because of the latter's conviction.

"The general election is very near now. I could see that the delegates supported Anwar's decision to withdraw and Wan Azizah as president, so I responded accordingly," he said when met after announcing his decision.

In her winding up speech yesterday, Wan Azizah tried to ease the tension. "I was a reluctant and novice politician, and I had to get advice from Anwar. But I have been party president for eight years now. *Cacing sudah jadi naga* (the

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Parti Keadilan new line-up



- President**
Datin Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (*uncontested*)
- Deputy president**
Dr Syed Husin Ali (*uncontested*)
- Vice-presidents**
Azmin Ali, Dr Lee Boon Chye, Mustafa Kamil Ayub, R.Sivarasa (*appointed*), Datuk Jeffrey Kitingan (*appointed*)
- Supreme council**
Dominique Ng, Dr Badrul Amin, Dr Mansor Othman, Sivarasa Rasiah, N. Gobalakrishnan, Dr Zaleha Mustafa, Yayha Sahri, Johari Abdul, Irene Fernandez.

- YOUTH WING**
- President**
Shamsul Iskandar Mohd Akin
- Deputy president**
Fariz Musa
- Vice-presidents**
Khairul Anuar Ahmad Zainuddin, Tan Seng Toh, Amirudin Shari

- WOMEN'S WING**
- President**
Zuraida Kamaruddin (*uncontested*)
- Deputy president**
Rodziah Ismail
- Vice-presidents**
Dr Zaliha Mustaffa, Haniza Talha, Noorsham Abu Samah

worm has become a dragon)," she said to laughter from the hall.

At a press conference later, Anwar was asked why he had insisted on contesting the presidency despite knowing the ROS would likely turn him down.

"I thought the ROS would grant me

permission ... I did not think they would want revenge after eight or nine years. But I was wrong," he said.

Asked how he was going to consolidate the party with the unhappiness over his decision to withdraw, Anwar said: "I can't risk the position of my party. There are many unscrupulous people waiting to tarnish the image of the party."

Those who had waited to see how the party would move forward to prepare for the next general election were also disappointed.

"The quality of debate for policies was poor and there was no intensive discussion on the strategy for the next general election. (The delegates) were not interested in the debate but in the party elections and positions as well as in whether Anwar is to be president," a political observer said.

There are doubts about the party's ability to face the formidable Barisan Nasional machinery in the next general election.

Events at the congress were disrupted and delayed daily as a result of poor coordination. The youth wing election on Friday was delayed several hours due to an allegedly missing voter list.

"I am not confident that they will be very organised in the next general election. They weren't even organised in their own congress," a political analyst said.