

Will Razaleigh fill in for Anwar?
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IF there is one name in the contemporary history of Malaysian politics that gets mentioned as a possible prime minister whenever an alternative is sought over existing candidates, it has to be Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's.

It is not a surprise then that there is currently so much talk that Razaleigh, usually referred to as Ku Li, will be taking over the opposition coalition's leadership from Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The idea is bandied as a contingency in the event Anwar, who is facing charges of sodomy, ends up being incarcerated.

Basically, the opposition coalition needs someone who is of prime ministerial calibre to lead just in case it manages to secure the majority in Parliament in the next general election.

Actually the idea is not something new -- it had been in the air since Barisan Nasional's dismal performance in the 12th general election in 2008 under the then prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Following the results, even within Umno, moves were made to promote Ku Li as a "replacement" of Abdullah. But the idea did not catch on within the party and members stuck to the tradition that when Abdullah stepped down, the coveted Umno presidency, which in effect is tied up with the prime ministership, was handed to the deputy Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Then, given Ku Li's critical stance over some of the government's policies, including the one regarding the oil royalty for his home state Kelantan, the grapevine tingled with talk that it was a matter of time before the Gua Musang member of parliament abandoned Umno and BN. Despite all that, Ku Li insisted that he was with Umno and had no intention of joining the opposition coalition.

That was then. Now with the sodomy case hanging like the Sword of Damocles over Anwar, there is urgency within the opposition coalition to deal with the impending possibilities.

With Ku Li's launch of his Amanah, a non-governmental organisation aimed at carrying the voice of the rakyat on issues of corruption, cronyism and inter-racial hostility, the momentum gathered.

Bayan Baru MP Datuk Seri Zahrain Hashim decided to add to it by claiming that he was privy to information that the opposition coalition was courting Ku Li.

The idea of Ku Li taking over can be easily bought because all factors appear to point towards it.

Among others, Ku Li is considered a spent force within Umno, not due to lack of ability, ambition or drive but rather the party had gone past him since his meteoric rise in the 1970s and his spectacular power-play in the late 1980s.

With most of the current generation of Umno feeling that he had missed the boat, his impressive challenge and narrow defeat to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the 1987 Umno presidency contest has been reduced to exciting nostalgia.

That Ku Li had on numerous occasions been critical of the Umno/BN leadership and is known to be in contact with opposition leaders, gives credence to the idea that he is only weighing his chances and options before taking the plunge.

On the part of the opposition coalition, the more vocal supporters seem to be keen to see Ku Li within their midst as to them, it would be a major coup in the battle of perception.

In fact, to some, Ku Li would be a better choice than Anwar and if the latter does end up incarcerated, everything should fall into place nicely. It is actually not difficult to understand how some in the opposition are eager to have Ku Li fill in for Anwar.

A member of royalty with impressive academic credentials and as pointed out earlier, probably the only one who managed to mount a stiff challenge against Dr Mahathir, and without the baggage Anwar carries, Ku Li would be easier to "sell" to the electorate.

However, there are several issues that may be of concern.

Firstly, is the opposition truly united in wanting Ku Li to lead them? That would depend on whether they truly believe that he would be able to carry them to Putrajaya.

And if they do turn to Ku Li collectively, it would prove that without Anwar, the coalition and his vehicle, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), is devoid of any capable leaders so much so that it has to turn to someone from Umno. If anything, it may be used against them as a sign of desperation.

Ku Li would also not be the opposition coalition's first "last great hope" if Anwar is not around. The last time it was Datuk Zaid Ibrahim until he discovered that PKR was not his cup of tea.

But Ku Li does not seem to be in a hurry to announce anything amidst such speculation, not that he needs to. His oval office is ideal for reflection.

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