

Malaysia's Anwar Takes a New Dare
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Ousting a popular chief minister in his own party risks trouble but repositions him nationally

The surprise decision last month by Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim to push aside Khalid Ibrahim, the respected chief minister of Selangor, one of the country's two biggest states, and try to take the post himself is a complex gamble.

Among other things, it is designed to preserve or enhance Anwar's standing as a national figure, according to political analysts in Kuala Lumpur, by giving him a state to run. Should he lose the March 23 state by-election that would give him the job – considered unlikely – it would consign him to political oblivion and make his Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) appear riven with factionalism.

Former state Assemblyman Lee Chin Cheh raised the curtain on the drama last month by resigning his seat in a Kuala Lumpur suburban district that would allow Anwar to stand for the state seat. That has upset many within the party who view it as an opportunistic move by Anwar and who have applauded Khalid's stewardship of the state.

One think tank head joked that watching the opposition crack heads also gives Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak a respite from the barrage of personal attacks he has been under from the ruling Barisan Nasional's right wing.

Helpful move

Whatever issues Anwar's decision raises, strategically it settles the problem of a nagging internal party dispute, repositions him politically and resolves the issue of a popular but tight-fisted chief minister who has come under fire for refusing to spend money on infrastructure projects.

"Anwar will tackle national issues using a state platform," said a longtime United Malays National Organization political operative. "I think he is going to give UMNO real trouble. It is a good move for the opposition, but it has put UMNO on the back foot. I think as Selangor chief minister he will give Najib a tougher fight."

Although the decision was a surprise, it has been percolating since before last May's general election, when some elements of the Pakatan Rakyat coalition were already pushing to replace Khalid, who has clashed with PKR party chief, Azman Ali, over a number of issues, including state contracting.

Khalid responded to the brewing challenge by leading the opposition coalition to a smashing victory based on his corruption-free stewardship of the state; the Pakatan Rakyat took 77 percent of the vote while the BN got just 23 percent.

Anwar, despite his leadership of the PR coalition, is said to have been frustrated because he lacks a platform to influence national politics and leading the coalition in parliament was not a sufficiently commanding arena. As chief minister, he would attend the Malaysia Conference of Rulers, where he can interact with the country's nine sultans, who play a role in amending the constitution.

It would also give him a forum at the National Land Council, Finance Ministry and other key meetings with the federal government chaired by the prime minister. In the past, Anwar has shined in such gatherings, in contrast to Najib's performance in

front of key civil servants and ministers.

How do we spell G-O-D?

In any case, the decision to push Khalid aside was triggered in early January when religious authorities in Selangor seized hundreds of Malay-language bibles using the word "Allah" in reference to the Christian God. The issue has been boiling for months if not years, and appears to have been manufactured entirely by UMNO strategists, since Christians in the east Malaysia states of Sabah and Sarawak have been using the word to denote God for more than a century, as have Christians across the Middle East and Indonesia.

The states of Selangor and Penang in particular have become the focal point for a push by UMNO over the primacy of religious law, according to political observers, who say that despite Khalid's reputation for running a clean and efficient state government, he didn't push back sufficiently against the decision to seize the bibles.

"This religious police issue is exactly where Anwar should speak out," the UMNO source said. A Malay political analyst agreed, saying Khalid has found it difficult to control religious officials who are constantly on the backs of Christians, Hindus and other minorities.

The opposition has grown concerned that it could lose ground in the next general elections in 2018 over the religion issue. Anwar figures he is the best person to resolve this. While that may not be true, he is certainly more decisive than Khalid.

"Make no mistake, the Allah and seizure of bible issues is not end of the story," wrote Kim Quek, a PR strategist. "It is the beginning of a determined conspiracy built on race and religion to restore the hegemony of UMNO. It will go on and on until UMNO feels that its political supremacy is secured. Selangor government's impotence to deal with what could have been a minor incident if promptly nipped in bud, has already caused widespread dismay among non-Malays for failing to protect minority rights. Imagine the consequence of similar incidents of greater magnitude and frequency hereafter."

Wild card scenario

Khalid's careful stewardship of the state's contracts apparently also caused friction in the coalition because it meant that companies linked to the opposition Democratic Action Party as well as Anwar's PKR were frozen out, whether the contracts were above-board or not.

"Khalid is a good administrator but he doesn't believe in spending money," said another political analyst. "So he has a healthy cash surplus in the state coffers but in the outer areas, there is little infrastructure spending. That has been a source of frustration for the DAP and PKR who want contracts where they can, all UMNO-style, make some money for their politics. The DAP are also frustrated that the Chinese find it difficult to start sin businesses like massage parlors, karaoke and betting joints."

One senior Malaysian political observer added a wild card, saying the Selangor post could also be linked to a complex game being played out over so-called unity talks that have been going on for several months between the opposition and the government. One of many stumbling blocks to forming a unity government would be the likely demand that Anwar, as leader of the opposition in parliament, be given a senior cabinet post or even some kind of co-prime minister's job by Najib, which is

thought to be out of the question from the prime minister's side.

"If Anwar is in the Selangor post that problem is out of the way," said the observer.

"This move seems linked to the unity talks as a way to help the process along." As chief minister he would no longer be in parliament and would not be part of a possible unity government cabinet.

That is a questionable scenario, others say, pointing out that Anwar has pledged to retain his Penang area seat in the national parliament, which presumably would keep him in the leadership there as well.

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