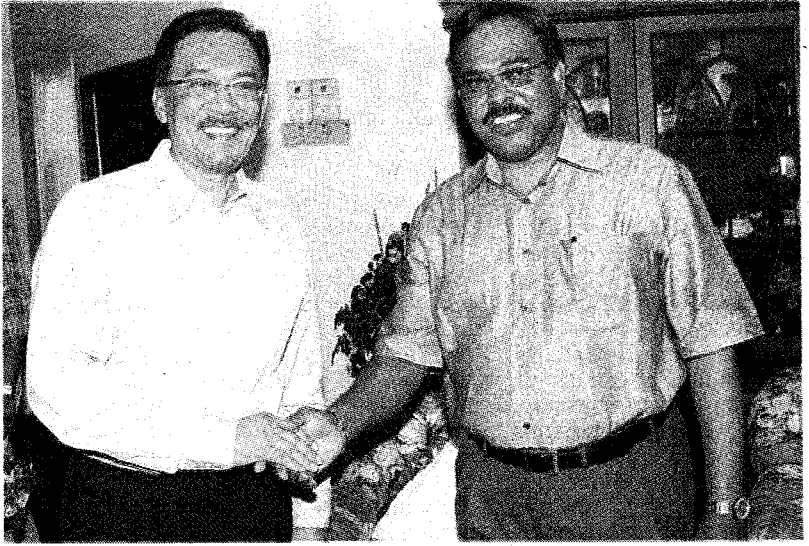


LONG-TIME FRIENDS: Anwar (left) shaking hands with Nalla during a recent meeting.



Nalla turns up, making waves

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ONE of the most under-rated of Malaysian politicians has suddenly emerged out of the deep shadows, causing some controversy and minor ripples in local Indian political and opposition circles.

After an absence of nearly a decade, Datuk K.S. Nallakaruppan, is back in the news.

Malaysia Namban first sparked interest when it published a front-page story on Sunday under the headline, PKR Indian section: Will Nallakaruppan take over?

The story was accompanied with a large photograph of Nalla, 58, shaking hands with Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) adviser Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim at the leader's house. Both were smiling for the camera.

The article speculated that Nalla, a former MIC deputy Youth chief, would be roped in by Anwar to "inject new blood" into PKR, saying Nalla would head the Indian section and "lead" the Indian community.

For those who have forgotten Nalla, he was better known as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's "tennis partner" at the time when the former deputy prime minister was making headlines after his 1998 sacking.

At the time of his arrest in July 1998 for unlawful possession of 125 rounds of Focchi 6.35mm bullets, Nalla was a director of Magnum Corporation, Malaysian Plantations, Kamunting Corporation and Chongai Corporation.

The charge was amended and he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in jail, but was acquitted and released on appeal in August 1999. Nalla had remained in the background, showing little interest in politics.

The news report has created uproar, with some Federal Territory PKR members calling for clarification from its leadership to avoid PKR being misconstrued as a race-based party similar to Barisan Nasional component parties.

When contacted yesterday Nalla said: "I was a politician before going into business. I have a keen interest in politics and have been watching political developments carefully."

Asked whether he will join Keadilan, Nalla said: "I am thinking about politics and keeping my options open. I will make an announcement at the right time."

He declined further comment.

Malaysia Namban editor M. Rajen said there was no financial link between the paper and Nalla.

"It was a speculative story about recent political developments," he said.

"We are merely responding to political developments."

The story had Indian politicians - in the MIC, PKR, PPP and even in the DAP - all scurrying to find out what the "return of Nalla" presages for them and their parties.

Nalla was first spotted at a press conference Anwar called on Friday last week at his house to give his take on the tussle between Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Nalla stood in the background at the house unnoticed by the many reporters there.

"He wants to play a role and naturally he



COMMENT

By Baradan Kuppasamy

prefers PKR to other parties," said a source close to Nalla, adding that Anwar was his close friend, and if invited to participate he would be very happy to lead.

However, Indian leaders in Keadilan who feel he would introduce MIC-style ethnic politics in a multi-racial environment like Keadilan have opposed Nalla's impending return to politics.

Several Indian leaders in Keadilan condemned the Tamil daily's report and showed their anger at the suggestion that Nalla will "lead" the Indian section.

Led by PKR Youth vice-chief S. Manikavasagam, the group said PKR was a multi-racial party without any racial sections and a separate leader for each section.

"In PKR there are no leaders for any particular ethnic group," Manikavasagam told reporters. "Keadilan president Dr Wan Azizah Ismail is the leader for all party members."

But Nalla is not one who could be easily brushed aside if he really wanted to enter Keadilan in a big way.

"We welcome his entry into the party and we believe it will boost participation of people in the party," said Tian Chua, the party's information chief.

"He has indicated his interest to several leaders, and we have told him we will be glad to have him. We have not discussed the position he will hold in the party. He will first have to join one of our divisions, and it is then up to the division to recommend him to the leadership," Chua said.

Nalla is an accomplished speaker in Tamil and was close to MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu who made him deputy Youth leader in the early 1980s.

But their cosy relationship suffered because of disputes over financial matters and they never saw eye to eye again. In fact they became keen political foes.

Nalla moved into the opposition camp in the MIC that was then led by the late Datuk K. Pathmanaban who was believed to have introduced him to Anwar. He and Anwar became buddies.

With the next general election speculated to be not too far off, Nalla with his financial clout would be an asset to Keadilan.

He was also a member of the Tamil Writers Association and owned the now defunct Tamil daily *Thina Murasu*.

Nalla might not make it to the front rows of national politics but he is set to play a major background role, at least in opposition politics.

□ K. Baradan is a freelance journalist who writes on politics and business for various international publications.