



PIX BY HABHAJAN SINGH

HERE TO STAY?

At its just-concluded congress, former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim made a strong case that he was bent on staying put with Keadilan. With this, what's next for the Opposition party?

By Habhajan Singh

WHAT IS Parti Keadilan Rakyat (Keadilan)'s worth? As an operational outfit, it is no match for the commonwealth of the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN). But is Keadilan slowly shaping into an entity which deserves more attention?

'They pose no threat,' remarks a minister from Umno when posed the question. They are at most spoilers, suggest a couple of political observers. They are behaving more like an overgrown non-governmental organisation (NGO), quips another. These are common refrains coming from most political commentators.

True, Keadilan is but a one-party seat, with its President Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail as its single representative in Parliament. It gathered momentum around the cries of *reformasi* that was played out following the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Now that he's out of prison, some

believe Keadilan will simply wither away.

Of course, the gathering of the Keadilan faithfuls comes no way close to the well-lubricated and finely-tuned Umno annual general meetings.

'It's no easy task to organise the congress. We applied to various places but were rejected with all kinds of reasons, except for the Chinese temples,' says Keadilan's Secretary-General Datuk Kamarul Baharin Abbas.

While no acid test, pulling off the recent congress is telling, especially when taking into account the routine challenges faced by Opposition parties. It's a story of Keadilan, slowly but surely, putting its house in order.

'I wish we could take the party to that level,' remarks a senior leader of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the country's current largest Opposition party in Parliament.

The congress is but a baby step when compared to the other more well-honed parties, including Pas and DAP.

When talking about structure, Keadilan

has some gaping holes. The same applies when looking at its leadership. With Anwar in prison, his wife Wan Azizah ended up as the party's president, prior to its merger with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM). It reflects the dearth of leaders of calibre.

'A political party must have leaders who can hold the party together. Keadilan behaves like one big NGO, with its leaders going in all directions. They lack cohesiveness,' says one political commentator.

One obvious concern will be party funding. One delegate from Kluang, Johor, asked if it were true that Anwar would 'dole out the supposed war-chest hidden somewhere'. Now, he is talking about Aladdin's cave, where Anwar is supposed to have stashed away his millions.

Fielding this question, Anwar said that the party was facing difficulty, but it will not be as bad as the previous election. 'We've received donations far more than expected. The good news is that it won't

be like the previous election where we did not have enough money even to print posters.'

While the party has been able to attract non-Malays, it is not in the kind of numbers it had hoped for. One of them is P Rajah Krishnasamy, who heads the Klang division and is the party's number two man in Selangor. 'Our branch is a model for the country. We have a multiracial team,' says Rajah, who is a partner in a metal fabrication business.

Tan Weiwn, the assistant secretary of Keadilan Perak Youth, acknowledges the difficulty in attracting Chinese and Indian members. 'Keadilan is my first taste of politics. I joined because I was attracted by its multiracial approach. In Perak, we have Malay-dominated branches led by a Chinese, and vice-versa. That's the way to move forward,' says the 37-year-old engineer.

Then there is S Manikavasagam, a vice-president of Keadilan Youth. With a father-in-law — Datuk P Wilson Segamani — who is an MIC-appointed senator, what prompted him to throw his allegiance behind Keadilan? 'I've been greatly disturbed by the numerous deaths in custody. And so many of them are Indians and the MIC has done precious little to help the victims,' he says.

'We're a small group of people trying to break free from compartmentalised, race-

based politics,' says Keadilan's information head, Chua Tian Chang, popularly known as Tian Chua.

The Anwar factor

Anwar is what makes Keadilan tick. After routine discussions and debates, the Keadilan congress clearly came alive with his presence. The political play is made all the more interesting and exciting with the growing presence of the still-charismatic Anwar. After a six-year jail sentence, the man still looms large on the sidelines of Malaysian politics. If Keadilan is dabbling with the multiracial concept in one part of the story, then the former Deputy Prime Minister makes up the other half.

Barred from holding political office till April 2008, Anwar took the congress as a platform to clear the air on rumours and hunches that he would eventually rejoin Umno.

'I have decided to remain with Keadilan,' the party adviser told the 700-odd delegates present on the second night of the congress. '*Saya telah mengambil keputusan untuk bersama dengan Keadilan* (I have made the decision to be with Keadilan),' were his exact words.

To many, this was possibly the biggest question mark hanging over Keadilan. Addressing the constant chatter about him rejoining Umno, Anwar told the delegates: 'I have one message: Don't

again ask about Anwar's stand.' Switching from Bahasa Malaysia to English, as if to drive home the point, he went on: 'I have decided. It's very difficult (to rejoin Umno) because the party has become so corrupt and lost its ideals.' And as if on cue, the house broke into approving applause.

Later, at a Press conference, one observant journalist asked if Anwar would rejoin Umno if it reformed itself.

'No,' he shot back.

But he is not back for good yet. Since his release from prison in September 2004, Anwar has stationed himself more abroad than in the country. And this will go on for a while more. From May 2006 onwards, he told delegates, he'll 'be in Malaysia most of the time'.

For a person — as most Keadilan members would readily admit — around whom most things happen, is this not a letdown? With the next general election expected in 2008, should he not be more home than abroad from now itself?

At the Press conference, Anwar explained his predicament. Teaching at Oxford University in the United Kingdom and Georgetown University in the United States is no easy task to juggle. On top of that, he has speaking engagements all over the world, plus providing consulting services to some big firms.

'People ask me why I have to operate from outside (overseas). I say because I can't get a job here. As you know, the system here is very repressive — no possibility of getting work here or part-time lecturing in any of the universities in this country ... I have problems making ends meet,' he says.

As the well-attended Press conference dragged on, you could see Anwar, flanked by Keadilan Deputy President Syed Husin Ali and Youth Leader Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor, enjoying every moment of it.

'I miss this. I've not had a Press conference in a long time,' he quipped later.

So, will his absence be felt?

Not at all.

'To tell you the truth, it's good that he's half the time abroad. When he's down, things get really hectic for us,' says Keadilan Vice-President Sivarasa Rasiah 'Not all of us are full-time politicians, you know.' mb



Anwar: Difficult for him to rejoin Umno