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PKR Elections: Anwar Strengthens his Hand

By Farish A. Noor

Synopsis

Malaysia's People's Justice Party (PKR) has just concluded its party elections that witnessed a number of controversies. The net result however is the strengthening of the position of its de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim -- though this has also alienated some dissident voices in its ranks.

Commentary

The Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party or PKR) has just completed its first-ever nation-wide elections of the party's leadership, after a month-long election process that has witnessed a number of controversies. PKR's party elections have been lauded by some Malaysian social commentators and political analysts as a positive step towards further democratisation of the party and by extension Malaysia. Penang-based activist and blogger Anil Netto noted that "the elections are being watched in earnest and will prompt other (Malaysian) political parties to likewise open up their party structures and internal organisational procedures as well".

Controversial elections

It was, however, noted that the final voter turn-out was exceptionally low, with only around 8.5 per cent of the members of the party voting. The logistical problems faced by PKR were evident as soon as the nomination process began in late September: By the end of the first week of nominations, the party was wracked by accusations of manipulation, fraud, proxy voting, missing ballots, disruption at voting stations, cheating by candidates, smear campaigns and the general unpreparedness of the party machinery to cope with collecting 400,000 votes all over the country. Instances of complaints were highest in Selangor, Penang and Sabah.

Compounding matters were the many allegations of internal party manipulation and even fraud. Prominent PKR leader former UMNO cabinet minister Zaid Ibrahim accused the party leadership of manipulating the voting process to ensure the victory of Azmin Ali – a close confidant of Anwar – to the post of party deputy president. Another contender for the post of deputy president – Mustafa Kamil Ayub – also complained of irregularities in the voting process.

In an interesting twist, many of those who failed to secure their nominations not only filed complaints with the PKR party committee for elections, but also to the Malaysian police, about cheating and vote-rigging. As the contest heated up, accusations of smear campaigns, dirty tactics and manipulation surfaced, with Zaid Ibrahim

publicly revealing that plots had been hatched against him by his own party members. Anwar Ibrahim compounded the issue by alleging that PKR had been ‘infiltrated’ by ‘Trojan horses’ sent by UMNO and backed by wealthy funders.

Zaid Ibrahim’s Resignation

By the third week of the election process, the protests within the party had reached the point where some party branches quit en bloc, citing loss of confidence in the party leadership and irregularities in the voting process. At the peak of the controversy, the PKR suffered its worst blow with Zaid Ibrahim announcing his resignation from his posts and the party, ostensibly to form his own by mid-December.

By the end of November the results were known and the so-called ‘Anwar faction’ has gained control of PKR. With Wan Azizah – Anwar’s wife – as party president and Azmin Ali as deputy president, the highest votes for the four posts of vice-presidents went to Nurul Izzah, Anwar’s daughter. The final line-up of the party leadership is a mixed bag of Anwar loyalists as well as activists like Tian Chua, Elizabeth Wong, Badrul Amin and Latheefa Koya; and the overall composition of the leadership does reflect some sense of both ethnic/racial as well as gender balance.

The PKR elections were closely watched by both party members and their counterparts in the Islamist party PAS and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) who are part of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition. Some members of the Pakatan Rakyat coalition were more sanguine in their observations. In the words of Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad of PAS: “Being a young party where traditions are not yet established PKR has more opportunities to be creative in its mechanics of the party’s elections. But it is not without its price and they are paying for it now. In the final analysis it will be good for PKR if it learns to manage such crises and chaos in the future, and there needs to be more order and discipline (in PKR).”

Anwar Dominant

Notwithstanding the crises that affected the PKR elections, it is now clear that the party is under firmer control of Anwar, -- de facto leader of the opposition -- and his loyalists. As if to underscore Anwar’s dominance further, a final controversy erupted on the last day of the PKR Congress when the party president Wan Azizah had this to say of Anwar, her husband:

“.. Saudara Anwar Ibrahim adalah seorang hebat yang memang dianugerahkan Tuhan untuk kita semua untuk menjadi pemimpin rakyat”. (Translation: “Anwar Ibrahim is a great man who has been gifted to us by God to lead the people”.)

Political rhetoric aside, Wan Azizah’s somewhat hyperbolic comment about Anwar was immediately chanced upon by his critics in and outside the party, and fully exploited by the mainstream media that has been hostile to the opposition parties. They cited this as an instance of hubris and self-delusion in a party that has not been able to evolve beyond the leadership and personality cult of Anwar. Interestingly the statement was also heavily criticised by many of Malaysia’s otherwise neutral social commentators, analysts and alternative media.

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