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### **The Selangor Chief Minister Crisis and the Future of Pakatan Rakyat (PR)**

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The Selangor chief minister saga is finally over. After eight long months of political jockeying and uncertainty, the Sultan of Selangor has finally decided on Azmin Ali, the deputy president of the People's Justice Party (PKR) to be the next chief minister of Selangor. This appointment is likely to have long term consequences for the PKR, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition and Anwar Ibrahim's political future.

#### **PAS's Position in the Selangor Crisis**

Even before the 2013 general election, the PR coalition was struggling to project a united front. Its coalition partner, in particular PAS, has been demonstrating adamant positions in contentious disputes, such as the *Allah* issue which has seen the Islamist party changing its stance several times, as well as the *hudud* issue which has drawn flak from Democratic Action Party (DAP) leaders. DAP and PAS have had a long history of public tensions; in 2001 DAP left the short-lived Barisan Alternatif coalition due to ideological differences with PAS.

PAS' relationship with PKR – another key PR partner – has arguably been more cordial until recent times when the move to replace Khalid Ibrahim as Selangor's Menteri Besar surfaced. PAS, which was already risking disunity among its ranks had to negotiate between religious conservatism and political expediency. While the former would bode well with the bulk of its supporters, the latter would net broader support from coalition supporters. In reality, dilemma such as these are hardly new to PAS as the party has long grappled on maintaining its Islamic identity while embarking on partnerships to attract non-Muslim voters.

As an Islamist party, PAS has always championed the *hudud* cause, much to the chagrin of its less conservative supporters. However working in the PR coalition in the past few years, PAS has taken a more centrist role in politics; for some time core issues pertaining to an Islamist party have been unclear, such as the Islamic state and *hudud*.

The modernist camp within PAS, who are generally regarded as staunch supporters of Anwar Ibrahim, seeks to solder support within the PR coalition, while the conservatives are keenly aware of PAS' diluted character as the party remains ambivalent on controversial religious issues. This has caused much worry among conservatives, who view that a closer relationship, and possibly a unity coalition with the ruling UMNO party, will be more fitting to PAS' Islamist agenda.

Thus the replacement of Khalid Ibrahim cannot be regarded as independent from these variables. When the so-called "Kajang Move" was set in motion in early in 2014, Anwar Ibrahim was widely believed to be the man replacing Khalid Ibrahim as Selangor's Chief Minister. Even then, there were dissenting voices against the plan. Among PAS party members, Anwar Ibrahim is as much a uniting as well as a divisive figure; while he has managed to cobble together the coalition, he also represented the voice of the modernists within PAS. However the "Kajang Move" was impeded by Anwar's on-going court battle and Wan Azizah was subsequently named as the replacement. For the conservative quarters within PAS, the choice was clear: showing any support for Anwar or his deputies would be deemed as compromising on the party's independent decision. It was perhaps not surprising that PAS President Hadi Awang, as well as the Syura Council, initially backed Khalid to remain as Chief Minister. However PAS later withdrew their support from him. Khalid was then expelled from the PKR and continued to administer Selangor as an independent Chief Minister. Even so, the deep divisions within PAS were evident as four of the party's members were still serving under Khalid despite his expulsion.

In the nomination for the Chief Minister to replace Khalid, PAS' rejection of Wan Azizah proved futile as she managed to obtain the majority support of Selangor assemblymen, including PAS' Shaari Sungip and Hasnul Baharuddin. This caused uproar from within the party as the two broke ranks with PAS. Moreover, this affair underlined the deep division within PAS party leaders on the issue, and more significantly on whether PAS should toe Pakatan's line or remain independent to its cause.

The strong sentiment behind the issue was also highlighted in a leaked phone message from PAS Research Centre operations director Mohd Zuhdi Marzuki. In it, he outlined a possible scenario should PAS withdraw from the Pakatan coalition: that the party would have UMNO's backing for Khalid Ibrahim as the Chief Minister, while consolidating the Malay-Muslim support, and acting in favour of the conservatives where contentious religious issues are concerned.

In an attempt to salvage a compromise of the situation, PAS later placed Azmin Ali as an alternative to become MB, which was later agreed upon by Selangor Palace. The selection of Azmin marks the peak of the tussle between the opposition coalition, which had thus far been unable elegantly come up with a unanimous solution.

According to PAS President Hadi Awang, PAS was not informed of the plan to replace Khalid when the "Kajang Move" was initiated.<sup>1</sup> Instead, it was only after the Kajang assemblyman resignation that there began rumours of the Selangor Chief Minister getting replaced. Hadi Awang also said that PAS was in disagreement over the replacement of Khalid was deemed to have done his job well, and that there was no reason to replace him.<sup>2</sup> These elaborations by Hadi Awang demonstrated the two key problems that PAS is facing, not only with regards to the Selangor Chief Minister issue, but also their relationship with Pakatan. Firstly, it supports the claim that PAS is playing second fiddle in the Pakatan coalition. Not only is the party perceived as compromising too much to the political demands of its alliance members, but it also demonstrated that they are having limited engagement within the coalition when it comes to making key political decisions. Concomitantly this provides the fodder for certain quarters to push for a closer relationship with UMNO, which is couched under the rhetoric of a united Malay-Muslim political alliance. Admittedly these are variables external to the party, and thus

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<sup>1</sup> Terengganukini, "Dialog & Penjelasan Isu Terkini Bah 1," *YouTube*, 5 Sep 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gg\\_Mkefe-d0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gg_Mkefe-d0)

<sup>2</sup> Terengganukini, "Dialog & Penjelasan Isu Terkini Bah 1."

might be considered to be outside their scope of influence.

A second factor is the party's persistent difficulty of managing not only its members, but more so its leaders. As a political party with more than half a century of experience, party and leadership decisions should be more consistent with each other, such as in supporting Khalid's leadership. The mismanagement of its leadership, as evident in this episode when the two assemblymen broke party ranks, was also testament to the challenges of maintaining a united front.

Nonetheless, these predicaments are the result of a problematic relationship among the Pakatan coalition partners, which is still young compared to its counterpart. Whether the pressure of this incident strengthens or weakens the PAS' relationship with its allies, only time will tell.

### **DAP and the Selangor MB Crisis**

DAP is no stranger to the various plausible intrigues, both extra-party and intra-party, involved in the appointment of the Selangor MB. In theory, by right DAP should have been Selangor PR's senior coalition partner. And broadly speaking, in most Commonwealth jurisdictions which practice the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, the senior component party of a victorious parliamentary coalition should have been accorded the privilege of nominating one of its own assemblypersons to head the new government. In actuality, however, and in the "special" multiracial context of Malaysia, that did not happen to DAP.

After the unexpected landslide victory for the PR coalition in the 2008 Selangor state election, DAP found itself having won the most number of state assembly seats – all by non-Malays – among the three PR component parties, but was denied the opportunity to nominate any of its assemblypersons to become the Selangor MB. This was because provisions of the Selangor state constitution all but require that only a Malay can be appointed MB.

As such, the Selangor MB "quota" was then, however reluctantly from the DAP point of view, passed over to the next largest Selangor PR component party, PKR, which, with the consensus of all three PR component parties, nominated Khalid Ibrahim to be appointed the MB. As a sort of compromise and courtesy to DAP's preeminent position by virtue of its having the most number of state assemblypersons, a specially created senior executive councillor (in effect the deputy MB) was allotted to DAP, as well as the most number of executive council (state cabinet) members.

The political scenario in the neighbouring state of Perak back then also nearly mirrored that of Selangor, with DAP securing most number of state assembly seats but was denied the opportunity to nominate one of its own assemblypersons as MB. A similar compromise solution was also crafted whereby a PAS assemblyperson was appointed the Perak MB, with DAP rewarded with a senior executive councillor and the most number of executive council members. But this special arrangement lasted for less than a year, when several Perak PR assemblypersons defected which led to the downfall of the PR state government.

In the 2013 Selangor state election, DAP scored an even more resounding victory by winning all the seats it contested, defeating its main rivals the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan), which both won no seat at all. DAP again emerged as the party with the most number of assemblypersons both in the PR coalition as well as overall in the Selangor state assembly. And once again it was denied the top political job in the state. Khalid Ibrahim continued as the Selangor MB.

Even before the present Selangor MB crisis, DAP has stood steadfastly by PKR, and especially the latter's de facto leader, Anwar Ibrahim. Earlier this year when Anwar Ibrahim initiated the "Kajang

Move” which saw the resignation of the then incumbent Kajang assemblyperson from PKR to instigate a by-election originally slated for an Anwar Ibrahim victory as the first step toward unseating Khalid Ibrahim in favour of Anwar Ibrahim, DAP followed Anwar Ibrahim’s lead. After Anwar Ibrahim was effectively “disqualified” from contesting in Kajang by din of his almost eleventh-hour (few days before Kajang candidacy nomination) reversal of acquittal on sodomy charges by the Malaysian appellate court, and his wife and PKR president Wan Azizah was filled in as the PKR nominee for Kajang, DAP campaigned tirelessly on her behalf primarily for the sizable Chinese and Indian votes in the constituency. Wan Azizah went on to win resoundingly in Kajang thanks, at least partially, to DAP’s mobilisation of its local election machinery.

Later, when PKR officially called for its own party member Khalid Ibrahim to vacate his MB post in favour of Wan Azizah, DAP echoed the call unreservedly. When Khalid Ibrahim refused to comply with his own party’s directive he was unceremoniously expelled from PKR, but he clung brazenly on to the MB post. Undaunted, all DAP assemblypersons joined their PKR colleagues as well as two PAS colleagues to signed statutory declaration expounding their majority support for Wan Azizah to assume the Selangor MB post.

When the above united-front show of force still failed to convince the Selangor palace of the trust and confidence of the majority in the Selangor state assembly in Wan Azizah as the new MB, and when the Selangor palace called for each of the PR component parties to submit three MB nominees, DAP again exhibited solid camaraderie with PKR in nominating only Wan Azizah, as opposed to PAS’ compliant nomination of three MB nominees.

Indeed, DAP’s main concern, in the present Selangor MB crisis and beyond, is with the rise of the conservative right wing of another PR component party, PAS, which apparently did not see fit that Wan Azizah as a woman should assume the highest political post in Selangor. In 1999, DAP lost dearly in the general election mainly as a result of its alliance with PAS, which was then perceived by most non-Malays as both religiously supremacist and outright racist. Over the last one and half decade, DAP has worked tirelessly with the more progressive wing of PAS to paint a more humane and acceptable face of PAS to non-Malay voters. And the results were impressive, with more percentage of non-Malays voting for PAS than Malays in the last two general elections.

In the last general election, MCA’s main campaign theme was essentially a negative “A Vote for DAP Is a Vote for PAS, and a Vote for PAS Is a Vote for Hudud (Islamic criminal) Law!” This platform failed to gain traction among the non-Malays mainly because they felt overwhelmingly disappointed with BN’s performance in safeguarding the legitimate interests of non-Malays over the past half century when BN has been the ruling coalition.

But with PAS essentially vetoing the possibility of a female Selangor MB (in the person of Wan Azizah) and its (or at least some of its conservative factions’) perceived intermittent “flirting” with UMNO on a theme of “grand Malay unity”, DAP is understandably disturbed, lest MCA’s platform “Malays United, Non-Malays Lose Out” scenario indeed plays out, which would undoubtedly erode DAP’s mostly non-Malay vote bank.

Nevertheless, at least in Selangor, which has a non-Malay voter base of more than 40%, DAP still holds the ultimate trump card vis-a-vis PAS not only in the fact that DAP commands the most assemblypersons, but also in the harsh reality that most of the state assembly seats won by PAS have sizable non-Malay voters who, if appalled by PAS’ overly religious and anti-modernist rhetoric and behaviour, and if instigated by the hugely popular DAP, may indeed turn against PAS.

But at least for now, DAP on its part appears to have papered over its ideological differences with PAS and joined PKR in reluctantly declaring their support for Azmin Ali as the new Selangor MB, which was in essence presented to PR by the Selangor palace as fait accompli.

### **The Future of PR, Selangor and Beyond**

In appointing Azmin Ali as the new Selangor MB, the Sultan of Selangor has arguably charted new and untested course not only for the political discourse in Selangor specifically and Malaysia in general, but indeed in the whole Westminster parliamentary tradition around the world. Conventionally, it was well established that a constitutional monarch does no more than endorsing and formally appointing the nominated leader of a victorious parliamentary party or coalition to head a new government. In the present case, this was manifestly not done.

Azmin Ali is perhaps one of the few politicians who have shown an amazing amount of resilience waiting patiently for more than two decades before finally reaching the zenith of political power in the state of Selangor. As one of the founders of the then Parti Keadilan (now PKR), Azmin worked tirelessly to build a strong grassroots base for the party. While many of the initial founders of the PKR have since left, Azmin not only stood with Anwar but has remained a close confidante to the opposition leader. In 2010, he became PKR's deputy president and has since retained his seat after successfully defending the position against Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim, the former chief minister of Selangor.

Azmin has successfully built a strong power base within the party with his allies occupying important positions within the PKR's supreme council, women's wing and most importantly the youth wing, Angkatan Pemuda Keadilan (AMK). Azmin has also been careful in building a team of young loyalists from different ethnic groups, many of whom are currently occupying key positions within the AMK.<sup>3</sup> A sizable number of PKR's lawmakers and state assemblymen are also Azmin's loyalists. While Azmin has built a credible base both within the PKR and other PR component parties, his biggest detractors and critics are from his own fellow party members. Some within this group would view Azmin's appointment as marking the beginning of a potential threat to Anwar's leadership of PKR and PR. The viciousness of the contest for posts during the recently concluded PKR party elections is indicative of the kind of politics that those opposed to Azmin might engage in. Their opposition to Azmin emanate from the belief that Azmin had engaged in dirty political tactics aimed in removing Khalid Ibrahim as chief ministers. Others cited alleged Azmin's malpractices and corruptions as reasons for their opposition to him despite the fact that these alleged corruption cases have never been proven.

Beyond the PKR, Azmin enjoys a cordial relationship with top leaders of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) including party president, Hadi Awang. Azmin's appointment is likely to reduce the tension between PAS and PKR although the decision by the new chief minister to appoint only three of the four PAS state councillors to the Selangor exco is likely to ruffle some feathers amongst PAS leaders.

Some PAS and DAP leaders have also expressed reservations over Azmin's appointment. They have little appreciation for Azmin's hardball political tactics. One DAP leader noted that Azmin is a tough negotiator during discussions for seat allocations in previous elections resulting in PKR being allotted more seats than the party actually deserve.<sup>4</sup> Azmin will need to convince these leaders that he can be a reasonable and fair chief minister who they can work with. Reluctance may indeed be the operative word in describing the mood which descended upon PKR and by extension also DAP, which essentially was presented with no alternative but to endorse the Selangor palace's choice of Azmin Ali as the new MB, such was the strong deference accorded by primarily Malays, which make up the majority of Malaysian population and therefore voters, to traditional Malay rulers.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with a PKR Youth leader, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2014, Kuala Lumpur

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Senator Ariffin Omar, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2014, Kuala Lumpur

In light of the recent Selangor MB saga and moving forward, the future cohesion of PR in Selangor and indeed in the whole country may depend on at least two factors. The first factor pertains to how well Azmin Ali as the new MB would administer Selangor, the richest and most populous state in Malaysia and thus arguably a testing ground for the eligibility of PR as a viable political coalition and of Azmin Ali himself as an ambitious politician to seek the national governing mandate. Azmin Ali, who was widely perceived within PKR to be a polarizing figure, will now have to display his inclusiveness and solidarity not only within his own party but also amongst the PR component parties. Azmin Ali will have to work hard to bring together his party fellows from different factions to truly present a united front against the BN onslaught. He also needs to act as the mediating figure between DAP and PAS in Selangor, which have from time to time clashed over mostly religious enforcement issues.

Besides, Azmin Ali will also need to be prudent with managing the finance and development of Selangor. If he chose to only narrowly benefit his cronies, who after many years in the "wild" would understandably attempt to avail themselves of the huge largesse of the state, then the popular support for PR would inevitably erode as was the case with the previous BN administrations, even to the brink of losing the next state elections. If he instead carefully disburses the state's tremendous resources for politically and economically advantageous activities, the popular support for PR which was dented during the recent Selangor MB crisis may indeed rebound.

### **Azmin: The Next Prime Minister of Malaysia?**

The Selangor chief ministership is an excellent opportunity for Azmin to prove his mantle as a competent administrator and suave politician. He will have at his disposal the financial resources to do so. The RM 3 billion laying in the state coffers should be used to fulfil some of PR's promises in its manifesto including assisting the poor and enhancing educational standards in the state. The new chief minister will need to enhance the facilities and educational standard at the University of Selangor (UNISEL).

A bigger political opportunity for Azmin is Anwar Ibrahim's many political blunders since 2008. Anwar is no longer seen as the glue that could bring Pakatan together having lost respect and loyalty through a series of questionable political moves. Shortly after the 2008 election, Anwar had brokered dubious political deals with politicians from Sabah and Sarawak to switch their allegiance to the PR in a desperate attempt to capture power. The Sept 6 move ultimately failed. Instead, the PR found itself losing the state of Perak when BN employed the same strategy to entice three of PR's own assemblymen to switch sides. Likewise, Anwar accused the BN of fraudulently rigging the 2013 elections and started a black campaign to denounce the election results. These moves were not necessarily supported by many in PR. PAS leaders and even Azmin himself had called for PR to accept the results of the election. With his increasing age and the impending court case looming, Anwar's chances to clinch the coveted Prime Minister's post is looking even more unlikely. Azmin does not carry this baggage and hence will be better placed to negotiate or intercede with the other PR component parties especially PAS.

In many sense, Azmin is the natural and most qualified successor to Anwar. If he is able to win his detractors both from within the party and in the PR, he will be well-placed to become the top leader of PKR and PR. While it is clear that Azmin will not mount any challenge against his political mentor at this juncture, his ability to administer the state government of Selangor well and unite the different factions within the PR successfully will enable him to set his sights on the top job within the PR and possibly the country.

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