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Anwar's Rise, Fall and Rise Again: Tests in Malaysia's Succession

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

While Prime Minister Mahathir rebuilds the country, his designated successor, Anwar Ibrahim, is laying the ground for the agreed political transition in about two years' time. The recent election in Anwar's party had, however, taken a surprising turn.

Commentary

ON 18 NOVEMBER 2018, Anwar Ibrahim was officially elected president of Keadilan, the party he founded nearly 20 years ago. Taking over from his wife Dr Wan Azizah, who had stepped aside but remains as deputy prime minister, Anwar's assumption to the post comes two decades late. But it was nevertheless a necessary step to bring him closer to the premiership should Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad step down in about two years, as agreed in a succession pact between them. A month earlier, Anwar had won hands down in a by-election in Port Dickson, giving him a parliament seat.

This two-step move – returning as MP and as party chief – was the critical precondition to being prime minister. It was a foregone conclusion that he would return to lead Keadilan, the preferred name of his People's Justice Party (PKR) which just had its 13th national congress. But Anwar's comeback to the pinnacle of the party that is now part of the Pakatan Harapan ruling coalition had been overshadowed by an unexpectedly intense electoral contest – some say power struggle. This was for the Number 2 position between two of his staunchest allies: Azmin Ali, the incumbent deputy president, and Rafizi Ramli, Azmin's challenger.

Fierce Fight for Number 2

The fight for the post was so fierce that many watched in disbelief, wondering whether Anwar was losing control of his own vehicle. In the end, however, when the results were finally announced, Azmin and Rafizi hugged each other and patched up, much to the relief of everyone. Both are future leaders they did not want to lose.

Rafizi had mounted the challenge against Azmin which he initially framed as New Malaysia's democracy in action. He disclosed his main reason later: it was his mission to protect Anwar's trajectory as Mahathir's successor. But Azmin managed to defend his seat amid accusations of vote-rigging, phantom voters and a flawed election process – hardly the kind of practices expected in a reformist party. Rafizi said he had decided not to contest the results and accepted his defeat, "to preserve party unity". But his message had been delivered.

Protagonists-in-Waiting?

Azmin had been with Anwar since their days in UMNO, first as his private secretary when Anwar was finance minister and deputy prime minister. Azmin became Anwar's loyal supporter when his boss was sacked by Mahathir in 1998 and subsequently, with a few others, helped Wan Azizah launch the *reformasi* movement while Anwar was in jail.

Azmin, now 54, had grown with the movement and risen with it, even beating off along the way two major challengers: Zaid Ibrahim, the former law minister, and Khalid Ibrahim, the former chief minister of Selangor state. Azmin ended up succeeding Khalid in Selangor before being elevated as economic affairs minister by Mahathir when the new cabinet was formed following the victory of Pakatan Harapan which Mahathir and Anwar jointly led.

Azmin's rise from state to federal prominence had strengthened his base in Keadilan, as demonstrated by the successful defence of his seat – the slim victory notwithstanding. With increasing power comes increasing ambition, and this was noted by the local media.

"It is an open secret by now that Azmin had earlier entertained the idea of replacing the tiger on the hill by going for the presidency," wrote Joceline Tan in The Star. If true, it is a move as ambitious as it was preposterous and suicidal, some say, going up against a political legend like Anwar.

Rafizi, meanwhile, has emerged as one of Anwar's staunchest defenders since he was persuaded by the veteran politician to join Keadilan. A committed believer in the *reformasi* vision, he took a big pay cut and left a well-paying job in Petronas, the national oil company. Younger than Azmin by 13 years, Rafizi is a brilliant young British-trained chartered accountant and electrical engineer.

A former party secretary-general as well as vice-president, Rafizi is equally sharp as a political strategist. He was one of a handful, if not the only person, who was confident about the opposition winning in the 9 May general election by relying on data analytics. For him, any internal attempt to derail the rise of Anwar as prime minister is tantamount to treachery.

The Contending Narratives

Rafizi's narrative centred around defending the Mahathir-Anwar succession plan. By deciding to challenge Azmin, Rafizi must have read the ground differently from most others; he must have been concerned about the vulnerability of the succession plan, given the chink in the Keadilan armour, which he feared could be exploited by "external forces" bent to block Anwar.

Rafizi said had he pushed ahead to question the legitimacy of Azmin's victory, Anwar's position as prime minister-in-waiting could be undermined; his enemies would surely have used it to question his suitability to be Mahathir's successor.

"I decided not to draw out the contest, because if this continued, the one who gets attacked will be Anwar," Rafizi said in his outgoing speech to the congress. "I observe WhatsApp chats, Facebook postings, sometimes even by the senior leadership, that disparage the efforts to elevate Anwar as PM. Some claim his time is over. Some claim it's time for new faces to take over."

Differences like these, he warned, should stop as they would only be exploited by outsiders to prevent Anwar from assuming the top post. Two months earlier, in an interview with The New Straits Times, Rafizi had also warned about the same risk.

"There are factions who are not comfortable with Anwar becoming the eighth prime minister after Mahathir," he said. "We respect differences of opinion. But there should be no differences in opinion on who becomes the next prime minister."

In his own wrap-up speech, Azmin pledged to continue supporting Anwar. "We are grateful that after 20 years Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is back to lead the party. I, together with colleagues, pledge to work with Anwar to face the challenges in the party."

Divisive Forces At Work?

With such an opening act to this new phase in the succession politics of "New Malaysia", the transition ahead to the post-Mahathir era looks set to be no less dramatic. The question on people's minds is whether there would indeed be a closing of ranks after this.

Shamsul Iskandar Akin, who is also a deputy minister, urged members to stop trying to create friction between Anwar and Mahathir. "Dr Mahathir is the prime minister. After this it will be Anwar, who is the PKR president. Do not instigate or cause a conflict between them," he said.

The same subject of "instigators" was also touched on by Anwar in his closing speech. The New Straits Times, in a front page report the next day, summarised that Anwar, as the new party leader, had "launched broadsides on three groups": "lackeys who badly stained PKR's reputation" in the party elections by instigating rivals; "people who want to pit me against Dr Mahathir"; and those who claimed he craved "special privileges" such as sponsored jets.

Who these “instigators” are remained unstated and therefore unclear. But “third forces” out to block Anwar’s ascendancy have been a common refrain in the rise, fall and rise again of Anwar Ibrahim since his entry into politics in the 1980s. Mahathir, acutely aware of this sensitivity given their tumultuous past, has lately pledged publicly to keep to his promise of a two-year timeframe; Anwar in turn has been studious in signalling that he was in no hurry for the top job.

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