

**The Faces of Conflict in a Political Organization:  
The case of the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat-PKR) of Malaysia**

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**Abstract**

Politics is inevitably mediated by cultural practices. As such, the conduct of a political party as an organization is suffused with culture with its own values, concepts and meanings. Malaysia is an interesting case in point. In this paper, the writers expound on the dynamics of organizational conflicts experienced by the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat-PKR) as an opposition party in Malaysia. By utilizing a phenomenographic approach to capture the participation, perception and understanding of party leaders and members, this paper focuses on three research problems, namely the levels of internal party conflicts, styles of conflict management and factors that influences the process of conflict resolution. There are several highlighted findings. First, the level of conflict occurs on the levels of inter-organizational, intergroup, intragroup, and interpersonal. Secondly, the styles of conflict management adopted by individuals in the party consist of collaborative, competitive, accommodating, compromising and avoidance styles, which vary according to character and political needs. Lastly, conflict resolution in the party is heavily influenced by (1) personal factors such as individual member's conceptions on internal party conflicts as well as their references to how conflicts have been solved before; (2) relational factors, i.e. relationships between members of the party which are fostered by an interdependence to reach a common goal as an opposition party, and (3) PKR's organizational culture which is built around a juxtaposition between the heterogeneity of geographical and ideological backgrounds and the authority of a charismatic leadership.

**Keywords:** *political organization, conflict resolution, phenomenography approach*

## **Introduction**

The organizational nature of the PKR today needs to be understood against its political background in Malaysia. PKR is a member of an oppositional political coalition in Malaysia called *Pakatan Rakyat* (People’s Alliance) or PR, which consists of PKR, Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Statistically, in the last two elections (2008 and 2013), PR has managed to gain control in five states, namely Selangor, Penang, Kedah and Perak. Although in 2013 PR lost the latter two states to the ruling coalition the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) or BN, in the national level, PR managed to increase its parliamentary representation by the rising number of seats it garnered in eight states, Trengganu, Penang, Perak, Pahang, Selangor, Melacca, Johor and Serawak.

People’s Justice Party (*Parti Keadilan Rakyat*) or PKR was established on April of 1999. It was originally launched as National Justice Party (*Parti Keadilan Nasional*) or PKN, following the momentum of *Reformasi* that saw Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of PKR who was then Deputy Prime Minister sacked by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad due to a dispute regarding the reforms that Anwar attempted on the ruling government—one of which being proposing the strengthening of anti-corruption agency. In 2003, PKN merged with another opposition party *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* and formed the People’s Justice Party or PKR.

Since its establishment as a formal political organization, PKR has increased the number of seats significantly from only 5 seats in the 1999 election to 31 seats in the 2008 election and 30 in the 2013 election. In the 13<sup>th</sup> General Election on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2013, PKR won in terms of the number of voters but lost control of the seats in the parliament. PKR joined the Pakatan Rakyat Alliance garnered 50.87% (5,623,984 voters), whilst the Barisan Nasional (BN) earned 47.38% (5,237,699 voters). From the seat composition in the parliament, PR only gained 89 seats—30 of which belong to PKR—while BN control 133 out of 222 seats in total.

TABLE 1. Result of the Malaysian General Election in 2008 and 2013

Name of Party	2008 General Election		2013 General Election	
	Number of voters	%	Number of voters	%
BN	4,081,115	51.4	5,237,986	47.38
PKR	1,529,256	19.3	2,254,211	20.39
PAS	1,140,598	14.4	1,633,199	14.77
DAP	1,097,752	13.8	1,736,601	15.71
SNAP	8,615	0.1	-	-
PRM	19,126	0.2	-	-
BERSEKUTU	942	0.01	-	-
Independent	65,399	0.8	192,890	1.75
Total	7,942,803	100%	11,228,548	100%

Source :Election Commission of Malaysia (*Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia*, 2008, 2013)

This means, although popular among Malaysians, specially in the urban area, it has not been able to take over the government ruled by the current Prime Minister Najib Razak's BN. Based on the statistics of the 2013 election, the huge wave of Malaysia's "political tsunami", as various media (such as the Economist and Newsweek) reported had occurred in the 2008 General Election did not produce a favorable turnout. Anwar Ibrahim's effort as the head of PR to take over Putrajaya had to be muted because the seat numbers were far below 50% plus one. Although the election result disappointed the oppositional party, there was no other option for PKR, with its coalition DAP and PAS, than to accept the final decision from the Malaysian General Election Commission. A rally of post election protest lead by Anwar Ibrahim ended unfruitful.

The party's election turnout leads to complexities in the internal organizational condition of the party, in which PKR was confronted with an organizational conflict ignited by struggles over who is entitled to sit as Selangor's Chief Minister (*Menteri Besar*) post. The conflict happened after Anwar Ibrahim was unable to gain the Prime Minister seat at the national level. Not to mention the legal cases brought against Anwar further obstruct the opposition's effort to bring him to power.

The 2013 the PKR's political condition was not much different from when it won the 2008 general election. In Kedah, when PKR succeeded in ruling together with PAS, the emerging conflict of interest was hard to seize. In one case, observing the inconclusive internal party, a member of the state government's executive branch (Exco) from PKR opted to leave the party. PKR's claim as a multi-racial supporters-based party has brought significant impact on the fact that PKR members are from various components of the Malaysian society. In addition, a significant number of them were previously members of other political parties with varying ideologies such as PAS and UMNO, not to mention some are from NGOs, interest groups and professional groups (Priyowidodo, 2013).

PKR as an opposition party, along with its coalition parties, seeking to defeat the ruling coalition is faced with both external and internal complexities. As an opposition party whose rise to power had been difficult to say the least, measures had to be taken to ensure the sustainability of the organization. Any problems in the organization pose a potential threat to the survival of the party and the opposition coalition.

However, it is also a fact that PKR is a political organization rife with conflicts of interest as its members are united primarily by Anwar as a charismatic leadership figure and a common goal to defeat BN. PKR consists of people from various backgrounds and ideologies. The tug of war between internal conflicts of interest and a necessity to unite in the struggle to reach a common goal makes PKR an interesting research subject as far as organizational conflict management is concern. By examining the experiences and perceptions of PKR members in the face of threats posed by the ruling government and the potential challenges posed by the diversity in membership background, this study was able to map out the dynamics of conflict occurring in PKR from the point of view of organizational communication.

### **Problem Statement**

This research focuses on the dynamics of conflict in the People's Justice Party (*Parti Keadilan Rakyat*) or PKR as an opposition party in Malaysia. By utilizing a phenomenographic approach to capture the participation, perception and understanding of

party leaders and members, this paper focuses on three research problems, namely the levels of internal party conflicts, styles of conflict management and factors that influences the process of conflict resolution.

## **Literature Review**

### *Organizational Communication and Conflict*

Conflict is normal in any organization. In fact, studies have proven that it is both necessary and useful as a part of organizational life (Agwu, 2013). There are several definitions of conflict. Conflict is defined as an “expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties, who perceive incompatible goals, scarce reward, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals” (Frost & Wilmot, 1978, p. 9 in Pace, 1994 p. 249). In this view “struggle” represents differences between the parties that are expressed, recognized, and experienced. Putnam and Poole (1987) defines conflict as “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals” (p. 552).

The notion of struggle as conceptualized by Frost and Wilmot (1978) is related to efforts designed to achieve goals, to secure resources, and to obtain rewards that are also being sought after by the other party. Organizational conflicts derive not only from incompatible goals but also from interdependencies developed by organizational members. In addition, Miller (2009) highlights that “conflict requires the *expression* of incompatibility” (p. 162). This is where communication is essential in studies on conflict. It is through communication that conflict is not only instigated, but also dealt with and managed.

Miller (2009) also notes that organizational conflicts occur on various levels. On an interpersonal level, conflict occurs when individual members express goal incompatibility. Intergroup conflict involves aggregates of people within an organization. Interorganizational conflict involves disputes between two or more organizations. Intragroup conflict involves two or more individuals in a team.

### *Conflict Management*

Conflict management suggests solving conflicts, instead of reducing, eliminating or limiting their duration (Spaho, 2013). Strategies for conflict management vary according to the “different philosophical bases of those involved” (Treslan, 1993).

Thomas (1976) developed one of the most useful models for conflict management that divides styles of conflict management into five types. His typology can be used to identify conflicts and behaviors of individuals commonly associated with each type. The five types of organization member based on their style of conflict management (Hall, 1969; Blake and Mouton, 1960; Kliman and Thomas, 1975 in Pace and Faules, 1994, p. 251) are as follows:

1. *Competitor or tough battler.* The person who employs this style pursues his or her own concerns somewhat ruthlessly and generally at the expense of other members of the group.

2. *Collaborator or problem solver.* The person who employs this style seek to create a situation in which the goal of all parties involved can be accomplished. The problem solver works at finding mutually acceptable solutions.
3. *Compromiser or maneuvering conciliator.* The person who employs this style assumes that everyone involved in a disagreement stands to lose, and he or she works to help find a workable position.
4. *Accommodator or friendly helper.* The person who employs this style is somewhat nonassertive and quite cooperative, neglecting his or her own concerns in favor of those of others. When a decision is reached, the accommodator may go along and wish later that he or she had expressed some reservations.
5. *Avoider or impersonal complier.* The person who employs this style tends to view conflict as unproductive and somewhat punishing. The result is usually an impersonal reaction to the decision and little commitment to future action.

There is a vast array of researches that delves into factors that influence the process of conflict management. Miller (2009) summarizes them into three distinct types:

1. *Personal factors*, which include personality, gender (Putnam and Poole, 1987; Wood and Bell, 2008), and the way an individual frames or perceives a conflict (Dewulf, et al., 2009; Lewicky, Gray and Elliot, 2003)
2. *Relational factors*, which takes into account the relationship between conflicting parties. Putnam and Poole (1987), for instance, noted that hierarchical level affects the way individuals deal with conflict. Another relational aspect is the influence that relationship has on the interaction through which conflict management takes place. Jameson (2004) discovered that the contradiction between maintaining independence and the need for interdependence among workers can affect the way conflict is dealt with.
3. *Cultural factors*, which includes organizational culture, national culture, and ethnic culture. Brett and Okumura (1998) studied intercultural negotiations among Japanese and U.S. negotiators and discovered that they work under different conflict schemes. Ethnic and racial culture affects the way individuals approach conflict, as Turner and Shuter (2004) discovered in how African American and European American women approach workplace conflict. Lastly, organizational culture plays a crucial role in the process of conflict resolution. Geist (1995) examined how culture built around power relationships, technology and the interest of organizational groups affects perceptions on conflict and its resolution.

## **Method**

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, a qualitative approach, specifically, a phenomenographic approach was adopted. Phenomenography implements an empirical approach in which the researchers investigate the experiences of others (Marton and Booth, 1997). Miller (2007) purports that phenomenography approaches participation, perception and understanding, as well as conception. By adopting phenomenography, the

researchers seek to describe, analyze, and understand the experiences of organizational members that were or had been involved in party conflicts.

As such, the core aspect of this research is the data that is primarily collected through closed interviews with 10 (ten) members of the PKR selected by means of purposive sampling. The total informants in this study consist of party members from the top management and middle management positions, as well as party members. The analysis is based on the informants' experiences and perceptions on organizational conflicts in the party. Qualitative similarities and differences were examined and described in order to discover the levels of conflict, styles of conflict management and aspects that influences conflict management.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Levels of Conflict*

The analysis of this study was carried out in accordance to the research problems. First, this research discovered that conflicts occur on an interpersonal level. The resignation of Tan Wei Shu, a PKR assemblyman from Bakar Arang, Kedah, on April of 2010 was the result of a reported interpersonal conflict between Tan and Sungai Petani state assemblyman Johari Abdul. In Tan's opinion, as a PKR leader, Johari is being unfair in questioning Tan's competence as Kedah State exco member and had allegedly spread lies about him. When Tan demanded an apology from Johari, who refused to do so, they were involved in an interpersonal conflict that was widely covered by the media.

Party members indicated that such interpersonal conflict was closely related to both intergroup and inter-organizational conflict. Local PKR politicians assumed that a group of people supported the action taken by Tan. As an oppositional power, PKR experiences a serious risk when members who hold important governmental positions resigns from their membership and opted to become independent politicians. That is why the resignation of Tan Wei Shu who was one of the Branch leaders in Kedah became a concern. Moreover it was announced right before the State Election (*pilihan raya kecil*) in Hulu Selangor. The reason stated was due to internal conflicts and "parasites" in the Kedah branch of the organization. Signs that this was not brought about by mere interpersonal squabble was proven by the fact that Ahmad Bin Kasim, the Kedah PKR leader involved himself in the conflict. This then became an intergroup conflict. Further, Ahmad bin Kasim had actually discovered two weeks in advance that Tan Wei Shu was about to resign and ran as an independent candidate as Tan had already approached Mohammed Radzi Saleh, who had previously resigned from PKR.

In addition, PKR leaders were convinced that UMNO (United Malays National Organization), the ruling party in Malaysia, was behind the conflict that led to Tan's resignation. There were attempts to break PKR's internal consolidation in order not to win the local election in Hulu Selangor. In an interview, a party member in Kedah explains that conflicts are often fueled by behind the screen transactions either political or financial.

From Johari Abdul's perspective, interpersonal conflicts in fact are not interpersonal in nature, as they are motivated by bribery from other parties in order to cause PKR to lose its members, as he mentioned:

Of course, that's because UMNO dared to bribe them so they resign from the party. Remember, here (in Malaysia), money has a significant appeal because parties have to manage their financials in a self-supporting manner. This is different from Indonesia where the state gives financial support to political parties (Johari, interview, May 2010).

V. Arumugam, a member of the State Assembly of Kedah for the seat of Bukit Selambau from 2008 and 2009 reveals that he was also offered money in exchange for his resignation from PKR:

Someone offered me a significant amount of money to turn to another party. It was a direct offer. If I turned to another party, today, the state government will not have anyone from the opposition party. Instead [it will be filled with] people from the National Front (BN)... There were pressures from many people. But I was elected by the people. That was why I quit my post in the Executive Council and State Assembly... The people elected me, I did not want to betray them. That is why up until today, everywhere I go, the people respect me, and party members, too (Arumugam, interview, May 2010).

Another case of interpersonal conflict is a longstanding conflict that occurred between PKR Deputy President Azmin Ali and Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim. The widely publicized "Allah issue" when Selangor state authorities (the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) seized bibles and raided the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM) to ban the non-Muslims from using 35 Arabic words and phrases including word Allah saw a strife between the two influential party members. Azmin was seen to repeatedly criticize Khalid's approach in handling the case.

The interpersonal conflict had become an intergroup conflict as Malaysian political analysts believed that opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim had intervened in Azmin's termination from the board of the Selangor State Development Corporation (PKNS) in order to contain the conflict between the two PKR members. Lim Tek Ghee, a political analyst, told Malay Mail Online (January 18, 2014) that "this is probably the most serious case of infighting within PKR since its formation".

The conflict leading to the termination of Zulkifly Noordin is a case in point where an intergroup conflict and interpersonal conflict could not be separated from one another. Zulkifly launched public criticism against Democratic Action Party (DAP) member Lim Guan Eng and lodged a police report against Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) who said it was alright for non-Muslims to use the word "Allah". The party decided to solve the matter in an organizational level. PKR's supreme council meeting resulted in asking Zulkifly to vacate his Kulim-Bandar Baru seat because he was seen to violate a disciplinary matter by raising a conflict that lead to a legal issue against a fellow PR member (The Star Online, March 6, 2010).

In 2009, an intragroup conflict occurred when the Kedah PKR wanted Mohammad Radzhi Salleh to vacate the Lunas state seat after quitting the party, saying Radzhi had been reprimanded for performing poorly as a state executive councillor. As an Exco in tourism affairs, he was even accused by the Malaysian Anti Corruption Commission (MACC) to be involved in various gratification cases in tourism projects in Kedah. In the 2013 election, Radzhi ran in the election as a candidate from BN.

These descriptions indicate that the level of conflict in PKR cannot be easily distinguished as political interests and power struggles confound organizational relations. On the surface party “squabbles” may start as interpersonal conflicts. However, in reality, they often develop into intergroup conflicts when they involve other individuals with similar interests or viewpoints. Also, these conflicts may be fueled by inter-organizational conflict whose source is UMNO-BN’s attempt to take advantage of the relatively weak organizational consolidation of the PKR.

### *Styles of Conflict Management*

Gaining voters creates a typical dilemma for the People’s Alliance, especially the People’s Justice Party (PKR). Human resources is certainly an issue that is hard to resolve. The deficiency of qualified human resources to sit in parliamentary positions was, therefore, inevitable. In addition, a minimal sense of belonging and militancy among party members, results in the fact that many individuals resign from the party after being voted into parliament or after obtaining an important position. They usually resigned from PKR in order to become independent members. Minor conflicts amongst individuals in the party are frequently dramatized and created an image that the party is in an emergency situation.

For those who are openly engaged in conflicts, such as in the cases mentioned in the previous section of this paper, it is apparent that a competitive strategy was carried out. The parties involved in the conflict refuses to compromise and forgo the common goal. Resignation or sacking becomes the final outcome for these “tough battlers”. When it comes to disciplinary matters such as what happened to Zulkifly Noordin, it is the party management that decided to resolve the matter in competitive manner since it was seen that Zulkifly’s action threatens the unity of the opposition’s coalition. In this case Zulkifly’s conflict against a member of the DAP and PAS were resolved by the party’s supreme council at the expense of Zulkifly.

The candidates who chose to be a tough battler and resigned are viewed by their counterparts as those who have no strong affiliation with PKR since they only use PKR as a means to attain a personal political goal: to win the election. Johari’s comment on Tan Wei Shu’s resignation demonstrates this view:

The people have trusted the representatives they voted for because they ran using the party logo. But then after they got elected, they resigned (Johari, interview, May 2010).

In the beginning, however, before Tan Wei Shu officially resigned, Ahmad Kassim had attempted to resolve the conflict by means of compromising. This style was adopted by Ahmad Bin Kassim in the dispute that led to Tan Wei Shu’s resignation. Ahmad used this style when he decided to apologize to Tan. However, when Ahmad apologized to Tan Wei Shu, he refused :

I was indeed offended by his (Tan’s) action. I thickened my face and apologized to him, but this (his resignation) was what I got in return (Sinar Harian, April 17, 2010).



When all attempts fail, even Anwar Ibrahim made an accomodative effort to resolve the conflict by means of mediation. However, Tan Wei Shu still decided to resign and the organization could not prevent him from leaving.

The tables below reveals the list of elected state legislative assembly member and those who eventually resigned after they got elected. From 2008 to 2010, parliament members and assemblymen who resigned as a result of disputes within the party organization reached an alarming number as listed on the tables below

Table 2: List of State Legislative Assembly Members of PKR as per result of General Election XII (2008)

No.	Name of State Legislative Assembly Members	Election Area
1.	V. Arumugam	Bukit Selambau
2.	Mohammad Radzhi Salleh*	Lunas
3.	Tan Wei Shu*	Bakar Arang
4.	Tan Show Kang	Sidam
5.	Lim Soo Nee	Kulim

\*) resigned as State Legislative Assembly of PKR

Source: author

These resignations were instigated by conflicts amongst members of PKR. In the election areas in Kedah, as listed in the above table, PKR had five representatives. However, with the resignation of Mohammad Radzhi Saleh and Tan Wei Shu, the compotision of PKR as the backbone of PR's power in the State of Kedah was significantly weakened. Such condition becomes the background of how internal conflicts were managed, so as not to pose another threat that may reduce the number of representatives and place PR in a dangerous position.

Tabel 3: List of Resigned Parliament Member from PKR

No.	Name of Parliament Member	Position and Election Area
1.	Zulkifli bin Noordin, Y.B. Tuan	Ahli Parlemen, Kulim-Bandar Baru, 6 March 2010
2.	Zahrain Mohamed Hashim, Y.B. Dato' Seri	Ahli Parlimen Bayan Baru, 12 Februari 2010
3.	Tan Tee Beng , Y.B. Tuan	Ahli Parlimen Nibong Tebal, 1 Maret 2010
4.	Mohsin Fadzli bin Haji Samsuri, Y.B. Tuan	Ahli Parlimen Bagan Serai, 3 Maret 2010
5.	Wee Choo Keong, Yang Berhormat	Ahli Parlimen Wangsa Maju, Kuala Lumpur, 14 Mei 2010

Source : Utusan Online , 3 Maret 2010 dan The Malaysian Insider, 07 Jun, 2010

Tabel 4: List of State Legislative Assembly Member from PKR who resigned

No.	State Legislative Assembly Member	Election Area
1.	Muhammad Fairus Khairuddin	ADUN, Penanti-PulauPinang
2.	Mohammad Radzhi Salleh	ADUN Lunas, 23Agustus 2009
3.	Tan Wei Shu	ADUN Bakar Arang, 15 April 2010

Source : Malaysiakini, 3 Maret 2010 dan Sinarharian, 17 April 2010

However, according to Anwar Ibrahim, these cases have to be viewed in a wider perspective. For instance, in the case of the conflict that led to the resignation of Tan Wei Shu, in order to manage the perceived conflict, Anwar diverts the issue of conflict in the internal party organization and relates it to the Local General Election (*Pilihan Raya Kecil or PRK*) in Hulu Selangor on 25 April 2010, especially the resignation of Tan Wei Shu, which was announced only ten days before the PRK (*SinarHarian*, 17 April 2010).

By diverting the issue away from interpersonal organizational conflict to a political issue regarding the local election, PKR, through Anwar Ibrahim is being both a collaborator and an avoider. As a collaborator, Anwar seeks to solve the problem by creating a situation in which, without discrediting anyone. He created a situation in which all the parties involved can be accomplished. The same strategy can be considered as an avoiding strategy since the conflict was not addressed directly, but is diverted to another issue. In this case it seems that PKR views the conflict as something to distance themselves from, instead of dealing with and solving it.

The Hulu Selangor election was held following the passing of a PKR parliament member, Zainal Abidin Ahmad. It was crucial to elect another PKR candidate since it would secure the composition of PKR's power as an oppositional leader in the parliament. In this election, PKR's candidate was Zaid Ibrahim as a representative of the People's Alliance who will run against P. Kamalanathan as a representative of the BN (*Berita Harian*, 13 April 2010). Zaid Ibrahim was originally from Kota Bharu but had reside for quite a long time in Selangor. Also, it is quite recently that he became a member of PKR and PR ever since he was terminated by UMNO in 2008. In this case his loyalty to the party has not been tested.

Due to the fact that Selangor is a state governed by PR, it was essential for PR to win the local election. On the other hand, BN also hopes to win the election in order that to place at least one member for each of its coalition party in the state assembly. When the late Zainal Abidin Ahmad ran against G. Palanivel from the Party MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), which is a part of the BN coalition, he could not secure a landslide victory. Therefore, it cannot be said that Zaid's position was secured. At this stage, after members of the parliament resigned from PKR, the party's position is critical because they only had 27 seats. This is not at all a significant lead compared to other parties in the PR coalition. Democratic Action Party (DAP) Members had 28 seats while the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) had 23 seats.

Thus the first goal at this point is to prevent the seat from being taken by a BN representative and also to amp the number of seats held by PKR in the parliament. For this reason, Anwar Ibrahim had to go to Hulu Selangor in person to declare his support for Zaid. PKR are aware that when Anwar Ibrahim is present and declares his support openly, covert conflicts tend to be stifled.

Further, an accommodative style was also adopted in order to maintain relationships with PKR's branches and members. Zamri Jusuf, the head of the Padang Terap branch of PKR, and also the head of PKR's training bureau explains:

Just like nowadays, many party members present various problems to the management of the party. They have the freedom to express any problem related to the party's programs... The point is that I do not put limitation

to communicate with them (Zamri, interview, in Priyowidodo, 2013, p. 140).

Similarly, Ahmad Kassim, members of the parliament for Kuala Kedah also explains :  
When I was state assembly member, I could communicate with people... I can receive and have discussions with party members. Perhaps we can make use of their ideas to develop Keadilan party for a better future (Ahmad Kassim, in Priyowidodo, 2013, p. 140).

From these two members of the PKR, it appears that, in the informants' point of view, accommodating style was necessary in the management level of the party in order to secure the future of the party. Ahmad Kassim was the leader of PKR in Kedah from 2009 to 2011. Interestingly, in January of 2011, he willingly gave up his position and let Wan Salleh Wan Isa as the chairperson of the Kedah branch of PKR.

Political interests and calculations by the political elites of the PKR both in the state and federal levels, it is obvious that competitive style of conflict management is considered to be detrimental while collaborative, accommodative and avoidance styles are considered more favorable.

#### *Factors That Influences Conflict Management and Resolution*

The styles of conflict management are greatly influenced by personal factors, relational factors, and PKR's organizational culture. On the personal level, styles of conflict management and decisions on how to resolve conflict is heavily influenced by individual members' conception on internal party conflicts. In Anwar Ibrahim's view for instance, conflicts are viewed as a consequence of the weakness of their recruitment system, which resulted in individuals that became weak links in the party:

I concede that there is a flaw in our vetting system. We rushed to choose candidates to contest in the last general elections but I promise that this will be improved (The Edge, October 12, 2009).

Furthermore, Mustaffa Kamil Ayub, the Vice President of PKR's Central Committee, Chairman of the International Bureau as well as the leader of Malaysia's Perak Branch of PKR views conflict as a result of the lack of discipline and sense of belonging among the members of the party:

The organization has exerted efforts in order to discipline party members, such as education and trainings. However, we admit that all of those efforts are still not enough. Continuously, as an organization, we need to keep training our members so that a sense of discipline can be maintained (Mustaffa, interview, in Priyowidodo, 2013).

Informants's statements indicate that the vision and mission of PKR are not fully understood by their members. Therefore, it is easy for conflict to occur when personal interests collide, or worst, when members are coaxed through lobbies from the opposing party. Party elites admitted that it is difficult enough to get qualified participants to run

for PKR in state legislative assembly elections. Consequently, taking drastic measures to handle conflicts is out of the question.

Simultaneously, educative measures are yet to be proven effective in increasing members' discipline and sense of belonging. In the party elites's experiences, problems in internal party system is seen as the culprit of why conflict is rampant. In addition, choosing the candidate to contest for the state assembly was a very challenging task for PR and PKR specifically. That is why it is difficult for PKR to be overly strict in terms of conflict management. Caution has to be taken in order that conflicts do not further escalate.

In addition, references to previous method of conflict management also informs party members and elites on how to handle conflicts in the future. As in the case of Zulkifly and Wee Choo Keong; even though they have a significant contribution for the party, but disciplinary faults that threatens the goal of the party needed to be resolved in a tough manner, in the expense of the member who violated the party's principles or harm the unity of the party and its coalitions. PKR considers that the step taken was appropriate to eliminate problems in the future when the the party promotes issues of change (*Harakahdaily*, 24 Agustus, 2009).

It can also be said that over the years, PKR has designed a multi-strategy approach in dealing with conflicts within its organization. These strategies can be analyzed as not only combinations of conflict resolution efforts but also as tactics to obscure the ruling party so that it is not easy for them to map out PKR's strategy in dealing with internal conflicts. This is necessary in order to face the "low politics" tactics of the BN coalition.

On the other hand, members of the PKR party, although coming from varying ideological, ethnic and geographical backgrounds, are united by a common goal, that is to struggle as an opposition party in order to defeat the ruling coalition that has held power in Malaysia for decades. This common goal creates a political interdependence between members of the party. More often than not, it overrides personal political interests, quest for power, as well as differences in ideology. The case where Ahmad Kassim gave up his power to Wan Salleh Wan Isa is an interesting case in point.

In the understanding of Zamri Yusuf, the multi-racial background of the party in fact becomes one of PKR's strength:

The PKR was established in April 1999 as the continuation of the reformation taking place in 1998. Since it was first established, this party has been bringing a mission of justice for all. That is why this party is well known as a multiracial party. For example, religious issues, Islam as the official religion in Malaysia. We trust this. But justice for all should be supported by the Malay, Chinese, India and Iban. Another example is the language issue. We agree that Malay language is the official language of Malaysia but we have to encourage the use of English and other languages. It really doesn't matter. The Chinese also agree to use Malay as a uniting language (Zamri, interview, in Priyowidodo, 2013, p. 229).

Similarly, Mohammad Hamzah also states:

[PKR] not only [accommodates] the Malay group as a majority, but also non-Malay. We join the People's Justice Party since it comprises many groups: Malay,

Chinese, Indian. It is not based on a particular group (Hamzah, interview, in Priowidodo, 2013, p. 229).

Those who are members of the PKR also comes from various political and ideological backgrounds. Conflict management endeavors are heavily influenced by the fact that PKR represents not only one ideological standpoint but accommodates various political views. As V. Arumugam explains:

The member of PKR were previously members of the Barisan Nasional, the members of UMNO, MIC and others. Then they joined PKR... Although some efforts have been launched to create discipline among members, but the cultures of members' former parties is frequently brought into PKR (Arumugam, interview, in Priowidodo, 2013, p. 229).

Lastly, conflict management strategies in PKR are heavily influenced by PKR's organizational culture. The heterogeneity of cultural and ideological backgrounds are united both by a common goal, as well as a charismatic leader, Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar has held both formal and informal leadership—when the top leadership position was formally held by Wan Azizah Wan Ismail Anwar's wife, Anwar remains the figure that party elites and members alike look up to. Ever since its inception, PKR has been identical to Anwar and Anwar, unquestionably, has been the most powerful figure that unites the party. When conflicts occur and all attempts had been exhausted, mediation through Anwar becomes the organization's last resort.

Zalabak (2009), Goldhaber (1993) and Frost (1987) refer to a leader such as Anwar as a dominant authority. The term refers one's ability in influencing other people. When it comes to PKR members' view of Anwar and his ability to influence party elites and members are apparent. Saifuddin Nasution Ismail, the Secretary General of PKR comments:

Allah has placed such abilities in him. And we recognize his ability in the field of science and those that are applied and accepted in the society. His experiences have made him capable of deep insights (Saifuddin, interview, in Priowidodo, 2013, p. 224).

Further, party members even concede that his dominant leadership is necessary, especially in dealing with conflict. They consider that such authority is essential, instead of being detrimental, as a democratic principles of leadership would suggest. This is evident in the statement of Mustaffa Kamil Ayub:

It is important for us to have a dominant leader. As an organization that brings influence and attracts the masses, we need a dominant leader. In the Justice Party, it is irrefutable that Anwar Ibrahim is the General Chairman (Ayub, interview, in Priowidodo, 2013, p. 224).

All informants recognize that dominant authority is required by PKR as a political party and as an organization. When the functions of an organizational structure is not yet stable, a dominant authority is needed in order to resolve conflicts.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In this paper, the writers expound on the dynamics of organizational conflicts experienced by the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat-PKR) as an opposition party in Malaysia. By utilizing a phenomenographic approach to capture the participation, perception and understanding of party leaders and members, this research results in several highlighted findings. First, conflict occurs on the levels of inter-organizational, intergroup, intragroup, and interpersonal. In the PKR, the levels of conflicts cannot be easily distinguished from one another. For instance, an interpersonal conflict can easily lead to or stem from an intergroup conflict as well as intragroup conflict. Secondly, the styles of conflict management adopted by individuals in the party consist of collaborative, competitive, accommodating, compromising and avoidance styles, which vary according to character and political needs. Competitive style of conflict management leads to an individual's resignation or dismissal from the party. Lastly, conflict resolution in the party is heavily influenced by personal factors, relational factors, and PKR's organizational culture and lastly the dominant authority of a charismatic leadership through the figure of Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar's dominant figure is seen not only as a symbol but also as a uniting factor.

The findings of this study suggest that further research needs to be conducted on the role that organizational culture play in conflict management in political parties. Papa, Daniels and Spicker (2008) suggests that organizational culture need is essential since a group of people with their interests may influence the conduct of an organization. Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggests that it is possible for an organizational culture to change due to complex economic factors, technology and social factors. This suggests that it is possible for organizational culture to change. The election turnout for PR, as well as PKR in the 2013 may suggest that the conduct of PKR as an organization may not be effective to increase parliamentary representation and gain power. The current organizational culture relies heavily on the figure of Anwar Ibrahim. An in depth examination into the culture of the organization may be able to shed light into how conflicts can be best managed in an effort to maintain party loyalty as well as increase and maintain seats that belong to PKR. Further studies may also be conducted on the dynamics of conflict in oppositional parties in countries that shares similar characteristics as Malaysia.

In closing, the current study – albeit in a limited setting – has discovered the multifaceted nature conflict and revealed sources of conflict and how they are managed in a political organization. This underlines the importance of maintaining a contextual frame of mind when conceptualizing the dynamics of conflict and when considering the effective way to manage a conflict in political organization settings.

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