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Treat Anwar's trial like any other

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DATUK Seri Anwar Ibrahim appeared in court on Tuesday and Wednesday to face five charges of sodomy and an equal number of charges for corrupt practices. He pleaded not guilty to all of them.

These are serious and extraordinary charges even against ordinary citizens. But Anwar is not an ordinary defendant. He was until a month ago Deputy Prime Minister and a young leader known for his Islamic credentials.

He held millions of people in awe with his khutbah (sermons), led thousands in prayers and freely recited Quranic verses and hadith (Prophet's sayings) in his speeches.

The trial proper will certainly be eagerly awaited in the weeks and months to come by audiences at home and abroad. Anwar has as many friends, supporters and collaborators abroad as he has at home. He was easily the most well-known second-in-command in the world.

Some may be inclined to sensationalise the trial as the "mother of all trials" but to the judiciary it should be like the thousands of other trials that it handles annually.

To treat this case as special will subject the judiciary to allegations that justice is not equal. It must continue to ensure that in this country, justice is equal for everyone.

In any case having a powerful politician in the dock is not new for the judiciary. It had put on trial political bigwigs for corruption and murder before. It had tried its own peers for incompetence and sexual misdemeanour. It tried foreign drug traffickers.

In the process, it was accused of many things - from being the tool of the Government to being the slave of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Yet when the same judiciary on Feb 4, 1988 declared Umno unlawful, very few people celebrated this as proof of its independence.

In fact, even opposition politicians shamelessly urged Dr Mahathir to use his power as Home Minister to circumvent the court ruling and stop the deregistration of the party.