

Anwar in Umno 'not as free as' Anwar now
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Opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim, a former education minister, has answered critics over his contentious move in 1987 to appoint assistant principals to Chinese-medium schools when they did not speak Mandarin.

Anwar, who held the cabinet portfolio from 1986 to 1990, said the decision was meant to bridge the communication gap between Chinese-medium schools with the ministry because many school administrators were weak in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia.

"My purpose was to smoothen the process of administration, but there were problems in execution (of the move). I accept that," admitted Anwar.

However, he also said he would not defend his decision.

He has been the focus of attacks by MCA and which have intensified in the Chinese press with the progress of campaigning for the Ijok by-election on Saturday.

Parti Keadilan Rakyat, of which Anwar is adviser, is fielding Khalid Ibrahim (photo, right) against Barisan Nasional nominee K Parthiban.

Anwar, who is leading the PKR campaign, was specifically asked twice during the press conference if he would apologise for the move, but he skirted the question.

"When I made the move back then, MCA didn't even raise it to me - only DAP and the Chinese educationists protested," he said at his office in Petaling Jaya.

He claimed that Umno 'confined' him as education minister and that he was not capable of resolving woes within the vernacular education system.

"But Anwar in Umno is not as free as Anwar now," he said.

Umno-led 'suppression'

Anwar, who went on to become deputy premier, said the Umno-led government had overt intentions to 'suppress' Chinese education.

This was because the use of Mandarin - coupled with Chinese economic dominance in Malaysia - was seen as a threat to the Malay language in the 1950s and 1960s, he said.

"Umno is using this obsolete thinking of the past... Now, the Chinese community without question, accepts Malay as the national language.

"Now we have to tell the Malays that the position of the national language is secure, and ask them why we should stop the enhancement of other languages (such as) English and Mandarin (due to their international and economic importance)."

More crucial as a policy is the current use of English as the medium of instruction for teaching science and mathematics - initiated in 2003, it has been heavily criticised by vernacular educationists.

Anwar said the policy has eroded the rights to vernacular education as stated in the Federal Constitution and is a subject that the MCA is incapable of championing.

While agreeing it is important to improve the standard of English, he said the importance of teaching these subjects in the vernacular language should not be compromised.

Last night, at a ceramah (political talk) attended by a 1,000-strong mainly Chinese crowd in Ijok, Anwar had touched on the subject and urged voters to question why the MCA had not influenced Umno to withdraw the language-switch policy.

"My fight is not with MCA. It's with Umno. MCA is nothing but a small boy that takes orders from Umno," quipped Anwar to thunderous applause.

He claimed that the Umno policy to suppress vernacular education would be maintained for as long as Barisan Nasional is in power.

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