

Anwar breathes life into Pakatan campaign
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After days of relatively poor turnout at Pakatan Rakyat events, the scene at Kampung Pematang Pasir last night could very well change the game for the coalition; and all it took was de facto PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Starting off with a small but enthusiastic crowd of 200 in more urban Ayer Merbau, Anwar's reputation coaxed about 1,000 people to come out in the mainly Malay village of Chinchin in Merlimau, Malacca.

This was despite tensions running high in Chinchin after a Pakatan ceramah (political talk) was disrupted by youths chanting 'Hidup Umno' on Monday night.

But if the turnout in Chinchin was impressive, it could not compare with that in Kampung Permatang Pasir. There, latecomers could only catch a broadcast of the star politician's speech from outside the venue, alongside about 1,000 others who had to stand on the roadside.

Cars, most with Malacca number-plates, were parked for a stretch of about 2km from the venue, indicating the size of the crowd. They waited for more than an hour for Anwar inside the venue.

This surpassed the 500 people who had gathered there when PAS candidate Yuhaizad Abdullah was announced on Feb 24, at the time chalking up a record for Pakatan in the by-election campaign.

While the large and enthralled crowd may not translate to votes come polling on Sunday, it does give an inkling of the size of undecided voters midway through the campaign.

Anwar's message appeared to be tailored precisely for fence-sitters, as he set the stage for other national leaders like PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang, DAP parliamentary leader Lim Kit Siang and secretary-general Lim Guan Eng, who will feature in the second half of the campaign.

Most Pakatan ceramah feature a constant tirade against the government that is all doom and gloom.

This time around, Anwar pointed out that the situation in Malaysia is not as bad as that in the Arab world where popular uprisings are taking place.

This was seemingly an answer to Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin who, at an event 3km from Kampung Permatang Pasir, had said Pakatan is "dreaming" if it thinks the Jasmine Revolution (pro-democracy protests for change) will come to Malaysia.

Khairy, who spoke to a crowd of about 1,000 alongside PKR turncoat Lokman Adam and several others, had hit out at PKR. He said the party is in shambles because prominent members keep leaving.

'Change will happen'

Anwar, who at times appeared tired, stayed away from PKR's troubles or indeed his own, only giving a cursory mention to his ongoing sodomy trial.

Building his speech around the predicament of ousted leaders like Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Tunisia) and Hosni Mubarak (Egypt), and the embattled Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, Anwar carefully argued that there is no reason for Malaysians to wait until they are pushed to the wall like the people in those countries.

Comparisons of family members of the Arab leaders with powerful families in Malaysia also planted seeds in the mind of listeners, as to whether or not Malaysia is heading the same way.

"Suzanne, the wife of Mubarak, was then celebrated as beautiful, kind and charitable. Now she has run away with billions of dollars of the country's money," he said, nudging the audience to another 'First Lady' closer to home.

Despite the media build-up to his rendering of a few lines from the famous Saloma song *Tiru Macam Saya*, his apparent jibe against the premier's wife Rosmah Mansor fell flat.

Rosmah, when speaking to Felda settlers in Kerdu, Pahang last Sunday, had said: "Look at my face until you are satisfied. Do I look like a liar? I don't, right?"

But the blank stares Anwar received for his presentation were converted into nods of agreement from the predominantly Malay crowd, when he spoke of being fair and just in providing aid to the poor, regardless of their ethnic origin.

"There are Chinese small traders around here, Indians in the estate, why shouldn't we help them? The people who shouldn't be helped are the tycoons who are now getting subsidies," he said when speaking of incentives for the industrial sector.

"Look at the Umno division leaders who claim to be so Malay for a few hundred ringgit. On the ground we fight (with others, saying) 'the Chinese are useless' (or) 'the Indians should go back to India', but (all the while, the upper crust of society is) robbing us blind."

Above all, as in 2008, Anwar's message to the people of Merlimau was one of hope.

"Don't be worried when people say things like 'this is an Umno stronghold'...The Arab world is the last bastion of conservatism and look what has happened. If change is to happen, it will happen," he said.