

Anwar's magic still works but is it enough?
Malaysiakini.com
March 5, 2011

If the rostrum were a playground, then Anwar Ibrahim is king of the game.

The PKR de facto chief proved he is still a force to be reckoned with on the political ceramah circuit, with people coming from near and far to listen and see for themselves the iconic leader who championed the reformasi movement in the late 1990s.

The talk of him being allegedly a sodomite and even a munafik, or a hypocrite, simply could not stem the tide of ceramah-goers that were eager to be entertained by his mesmerising oratory skills.

And entertained they were. Even if he appeared tired, probably due to the punishing schedule of running back and forth from Kuala Lumpur - where his second sodomy trial is on-going - and the two states, the 64-year-old former deputy premier commands rapt attention from his audience.

With every rise in tone, with every grin that goes with a joke, Anwar has proven that the sheer force of his personality continues to be a kind of magical elixir that reinvigorates a flagging campaign when it counts.

The biggest turnout however was in Permatang Pasir in Merlimau, where thousands turned up to listen his pitch, even if they had to park as far as two kilometres away from the venue.

With so many people packed at the actual venue, at least 1,000 latecomers had to be content with watching a CCTV broadcast of his ceramah on TV sets placed around the area.

The opposition leader's charismatic personality and charm, works its magic with the smaller crowd of 200 that turned up in Ayer Merbau and is equally potent with the larger ones. Such is his ability that even with a small crowd, he was able evoke an enthusiastic response.

'Revolution is possible'

In both Merlimau and Kerdu, listeners appeared to lap up much of what he dished out during his ceramahs, where he judiciously avoided, for the most part, past and current controversies facing his party and himself.

Instead, he focused on the recent revolutions in the Arab world, equating the uprising with the situation in Malaysia.

At each whistlestop, he spoke of the events leading to the ouster of Tunisian leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak as well as the current civil uprising facing Lybian president Muammar Gaddafi, drawing parallels between these countries and the alleged countless misdeeds of Umno and BN.

From corruption to racism and religious disharmony, Anwar weaved a tale of a people who would one day rise up to seize their rights from a government that has allegedly pillaged and plundered the riches of the land.

And at the end of every tale, he declares that the possibility of a better tomorrow is very real for each and every Malaysian - so long as they reject Umno and BN - finishing his speech by leading them with three cheers of "reformasi".

Still a real threat

His charisma is not lost on his opponents in BN, who have employed some ingenious ways to try and cut off the star politician's inherent pull factor, including inviting onto the stage a host of speakers who were at one time his allies and inner-circle.

The most prominent 'counter-agent' brought in must surely be Ummi Hafilda Ali, sister of his long-time aide and now PKR deputy president Azmin Ali.

And she is quite capable of keeping a decent crowd going all by herself, with tales of alleged indecency and the dark side to Anwar's character.

Indeed, a choc full of stories of sexual intrigue, subterfuge and corruption that would make any working girl blush.

But going head-to-head with the man himself, as she did at Rumpun Makmur in Kerdu, she couldn't help but falter as curious onlookers abandoned her mid-speech and defected to the Pakatan camp that was just across the road.

Also hitting the campaign trail to debunk the Anwar factor is former aide, Rahimi Osman, who claimed late last year that he was forced to sign two statutory declarations that linked Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and his wife Rosmah Mansor to Anwar's on-going sodomy trial.

Junior leaders in both Merlimau and Kerdu also made a full frontal attack on Anwar at the ceramah circuit, especially after his visits to both constituencies, that made it seem that the man himself was contesting the two seats.

Situation still unreadable

Despite the positive reception to Anwar's presence at the ceramah venues, the big question remains - how effective will he be in swinging the votes in Pakatan's favour?

A test case would be in Rumpun Makmur, a Felcra area in Kerdu, where he managed to hold sway among 700 people, squeezed against each other in the small clearing that made their campaign venue.

But if the admission by some who attended the double ceramah is to be taken seriously, then possibly a large number of those present weren't even voters in the by-election and were simply curious onlookers drawn by Anwar's star factor.

Pakatan's fall back on their de facto chief 's personal approach to rally the troops and boost their morale, may not be enough to convince the voters to tilt the weighing scale for a newer alternative, especially in rural constituencies where BN still holds sway.