

Anwar's pulling power still strong despite two hours late
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Anwar Ibrahim's deepening rapport with the working class was put to the test yesterday in Bukit Mertajam, Penang.

He not only survived the ordeal; he prospered, judging from the send-off he received when he ended his time-shortened speech to depart with his motorcade for the next halt of his three-stop swing in his home state.

Running more than two hours late for a ceramah in Alma, a factory worker and shop-keeping suburb in the DAP-held parliamentary constituency of Bukit Mertajam, the PKR leader apologised to the crowd for not being able to render the 'Anwar Ibrahim version of Malaysia 360', the state of the nation address he delivers at every major stop on his campaign circuit.

NONEIt is what the crowds come to hear - his brand of BN bashing and Pakatan Rakyat triumphalism, pitched to the level of understanding of the particular audience he faces and delivered with a brio unrivaled in the annals of Malaysian political campaign oratory.

"I have a tazkirah (religious talk) in Balik Pulau shortly," said Anwar to the crowd that did not need his tutoring to know that the religious stops on his schedule are not amenable to shifting.

"You'll have to forgive me for making this speech short, but if you can come to my final ceramah tonight at Permatang Pauh (near Bukit Mertajam), I'll make up for the shortness of my stay here," he told the crowd.

He explained that an accident on the North South Highway at Sungai Perak had held up traffic, forcing his late arrival at the rally that started at 4.30pm with preliminary speakers, Penang Deputy Chief Minister Mansor Othman and state executive councilor Law Choo Kiang, doing a fair job of keeping the crowd of about 400 cooling their heels while waiting for the main dish.

"Parliament finished late last night and I went to bed at 2 am," a baggy-eyed Anwar said in further extenuation.

On raised ground

With microphone in hand, Anwar had come down from the raised ground surrounding a football field which was the venue for the ceramah to be near the crowd so that the signs of his fatigue were easily evident to the people sitting under a makeshift tent on the playground.

The initial crowd of about 400 people, sitting under the tent and milling around the fringes of the field, had swelled by another 100 upon Anwar's arrival, heralded by the beat of an Indian drummer and a flutist.

It was striking that among the assembled, there was not a distinct plurality by any one race, composed as it was by about equal numbers of Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Their rung on the socio-economic ladder was as easily reflected by their modest attire as by their thrilled responses to the social welfare pitches in Anwar's spiel, especially when he espoused free education and lower fuel prices.

His ability to parlay his experiences into campaign grist was displayed in what he said about a programme featuring him on a TV show that was relayed to an audience in India.

Part of the show featured an Indian starlet who said she admired Anwar for the struggles he endured in his political career.

"The pacing of the programme was swift and I was unable to thank her quickly enough for her praise but then my wife Azizah said this was safer because it will make it difficult for people to produce a video of me with the actress," chortled Anwar to a crowd that chuckled at his game reference to his recent 'ordeals' with videos allegedly depicting him in compromising situations.

A winsome levity about his troubles as much as the compelling gravity of his take on national issues is the source of Anwar's drawing power on the campaign circuit.

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