

Once a pushover, Pakatan sniffs power

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By Dan Martin, AFP

After bloodying the government's nose in 2008 elections, a more experienced and organised opposition is eyeing the once-unthinkable: toppling one of the world's longest-serving governments.

Malaysians vote soon with the formerly hapless opposition buoyed by a new track record of state-level government, signs of growing voter support, and what its leader Anwar Ibrahim calls a sense of history in the making.

"I am convinced, insya Allah (God willing), that we will win government," Anwar told AFP, evoking the winds of change that powered the "Arab Spring" elsewhere in the Muslim world.

"Of course we call it a 'Malaysian Spring', but our method is elections (not uprisings)."

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is expected to call a fresh vote in weeks, pitting his Malay-dominated BN coalition against Anwar's multi-ethnic opposition alliance Pakatan Rakyat.

The 57-year-old ruling bloc enjoys deep pockets, mainstream media control, an electoral system the opposition says is rigged, and a record of decades of economic growth under its authoritarian template.

Few expect the opposition to win the 112 parliamentary seats needed to take power. The three-party alliance won 82 seats in the 2008 polls, up from 21, stunning the BN with its biggest-ever setback.

But speculation is rife that Pakatan could win enough in the polls - which must be held by late June - to lure ruling coalition defectors and form a government.

"Before this year, many were in denial about Pakatan's potential. Today, we see society beginning to accept that the possibility (of a BN defeat) is real," said Wan Saiful Wan Jan (left), who runs the independent Malaysian think tank Ideas.

The country's stock market has trembled recently over the uncertainty as opinion polls suggest the vote will be tight. One recent survey put Najib and Anwar neck-and-neck as prime ministerial candidates.

In a Jan 12 show of force, the opposition held a rally that drew close to 100,000 people, paralysing much of the capital Kuala Lumpur in one of Malaysia's biggest-ever political gatherings.

"I think it's very close, and the party that makes the least mistakes will be the party that

wins," said Ambiga Sreenivasan, head of Bersih, an NGO coalition that has organised large public rallies for electoral reform.

Pakatan attacks the ruling coalition, and particularly its dominant partner, Umno, as corrupt, repressive and lacking a long-term vision for Malaysia.

Anwar says Pakatan would end authoritarianism and free the media.

BN could lose 20 more seats

It would lure foreign investment by attacking rampant graft and reforming the system of preferences for Malays that is blamed for harming national economic competitiveness and stoking resentment among minority Chinese and Indians.

"The people are committed to reform. There is a legitimate expectation among the public for them to see that reforms do take place," Anwar said.

Anwar, who was acquitted a year ago on sodomy charges he called a bogus Umno attempt to ruin him politically, has been integral to the opposition's revival.

The former BN heir-apparent's spectacular 1998 ouster in a power struggle with then-premier Mahathir Mohamad gifted the opposition a charismatic leader with top government experience to rally around.

The loose alliance of 2008 is stronger today, having since agreed on a common manifesto, and has shown it can govern in four states won five years ago, the most ever in opposition hands. Malaysia has 13 states.

"Cooperation between the parties is much stronger than 2008. They have done more to prepare the ground for new voters," said leading political pollster Ibrahim Suffian.

Concerns linger over Pakatan's ability to govern nationally.

Besides Anwar's multi-racial PKR, it includes PAS representing Muslim ethnic Malays, and the secular DAP dominated by ethnic Chinese.

PAS's calls for an Islamic state are a source of alliance squabbling, but Anwar dismisses any concern, saying PAS realises the goal is a non-starter in the diverse nation.

Economists, meanwhile, warn that populist Pakatan promises such as free primary-to-university education could sink Malaysia into debt, while noting ever-larger public handouts by Najib's government also posed a risk.

Najib took office in 2009 and has portrayed himself as a reformer but surveys suggest BN is still viewed as a corruption-plagued, status-quo force.

Eroding minority support, particularly Chinese, that hurt the coalition in 2008 appears to be accelerating, independent polls show, while first-time voters estimated to number up to three million are a question mark.

One top Umno official told AFP that party officials fear the coalition could lose 20 more seats - it now has 140 - raising the spectre of a Pakatan power play.

"All said, Najib still has the advantage, but an opposition victory is clearly possible," said Bridget Welsh, a Southeast Asian politics expert at Singapore Management University.

- AFP

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