

Time running out for veteran reformer Anwar

MalaysiaKini.com

May 1, 2013

By Siva Sithraputhran, Reuters

On Sunday, Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim has his best - and seemingly last - chance to complete an extraordinary political comeback from beaten-down prisoner to leader of his country.

The 65-year-old former deputy prime minister and finance minister told Reuters in an interview he will step down if his three-party alliance fails to wrest power for the first time from the ruling National Front (BN) coalition in Sunday's election.

"I'll have given my best and if the people are not ready for change, it's better that you have a post-Anwar situation," he said after a gruelling day of campaigning in Malacca, a BN stronghold.

Anwar is closer to power than at any time since his meteoric career came crashing down in 1998 when he fell out with the then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, his mentor and Malaysia's longest-serving leader.

His alliance surged to its best-ever election result in 2008, gaining support from ethnic Chinese and Indians disillusioned with race-based policies favouring majority Malays and discontent over a lack of political and economic reform.

NONEThe charismatic former rising star of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (Umno) party said he was optimistic about going one better this time.

"What is encouraging compared with 2008 is that we have built the momentum rather early this time.

"Normally, you don't see a crowd like tonight until the end of the campaign trail," Anwar said as he sat down at a roadside restaurant close to midnight after a long day of campaigning.

Late diners mobbed Anwar for pictures and hand shakes, a reminder of how he remains a popular figure after his tumultuous political career.

'Premature power play that failed'

Anwar, who had long been tipped to succeed Mahathir, was dismissed in 1998 and charged with sodomy and corruption after he clashed with Mahathir over his

handling of the Asian financial crisis that battered Malaysia.

Many saw the events as a premature power play that failed badly for Anwar, who critics say is still motivated by intense personal ambition. However, his arrest sparked street protests calling for "reformasi", or reform, that still resonate today, especially for a younger generation eager for change.

anwar ibrahim black eye small 080206Images at the time of the goateed, bespectacled Anwar appearing in court with a black eye and bruises sparked international outrage. Only a year earlier, Time magazine had put him on its cover, calling him "The Future of Asia".

Anwar spent six years in solitary confinement and was forced to sit out Malaysia's next two elections before returning to parliament in 2008 with a sweeping by-election victory.

Fresh allegations of sodomy then surfaced and many expected Anwar's political career to end with a guilty verdict in court.

Instead, he was given a new lease on political life when he was acquitted in January 2012 following a trial that gripped the Muslim-majority, multi-ethnic nation of 28 million people.

Anwar has always maintained the charges against him were politically-motivated, a view shared by international human rights groups and a majority of Malaysians in opinion polls.

Fallen heir

Anwar has promoted a rival vision for Malaysia that would abolish or scale back its most authoritarian laws and scrap a system of ethnic preferences for majority Malays.

A magnetic speaker who has cultivated a range of international allies, Anwar rails against the network of patronage that has grown up between Umno and well-connected business people, fostering inefficiency and corruption.

His critics say he is far from clean himself, having long thrived within the very same establishment.

"Malaysia must mature as a democracy. And we must be able to ensure that the (country's) enormous wealth be well and prudently managed," Anwar said.

Anwar was born in northern Penang island in 1947, the son of a hospital porter who later became a member of parliament. He attended one of Malaysia's top schools and made his name as a firebrand Islamic youth leader.

NONEHe was jailed for 20 months in 1974 under a sweeping Internal Security Act (ISA) for leading anti-government demonstrations against poverty.

Mahathir invited him to join Umno in 1982 to bridge a gap between the party's ethnic Malay nationalist image and its rising Islamic aspirations.

He held a string of senior cabinet posts, including the ministries of agriculture and education, and had been finance minister since 1991 when he was sacked.

After his first sodomy conviction was overturned in 2004, Anwar quickly returned to politics as the head of a revitalised, multi-ethnic opposition, centred around Islamists and secular social reformers.

The 2008 election put Anwar's coalition tantalisingly close to a parliamentary majority, challenging the coalition which has controlled Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/228699>