

Najib target for Anwar's WSJ flamethrower
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In a scathing opinion piece penned for The Wall Street Journal, former opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim rains criticisms on Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

Since Najib's last electoral victory, which was "plagued by widespread allegations of gerrymandering, fraud and voter intimidation", Malaysia has taken a turn for the worse, Anwar wrote.

"Najib, who once promised democratic and economic reforms and pledged to allow 'the voices of dissent' to be heard, has doubled down on political repression.

"As former deputy prime minister of Malaysia and leader of the opposition, I am now in the fifth month of a five-year prison sentence that has been roundly condemned by governments and human rights groups around the world.

"I spend my days in solitary confinement in meditation and in the company of the few books that are allowed into my cell. Meanwhile, allegations of corruption at the highest levels of Malaysian government have surfaced," Anwar says in the article published today.

In 2012, he said, the Internal Security Act was repealed by the Najib government with much fanfare, only to be replaced with the Prevention of Crime and Prevention of Terrorism Acts, which are equally, if not more, repressive.

Beyond encroaching on Malaysian citizens' fundamental liberties, he added the new laws also rob judges of their discretionary sentencing powers.

"Instead of abolishing the outdated and much-abused Sedition Act of 1948, as promised, Najib's government has deployed it as a weapon of mass oppression.

"In the past 18 months, more than 150 Malaysians have been arrested and many charged with sedition for an array of activities, including accusing the government of voter fraud and criticising the verdict in my trial. The arrested include students, professors, journalists, cartoonists, activists, human rights lawyers and opposition politicians," he added.

1MDB saga and foreign investors

Anwar also trained his guns on the 1MDB saga, saying the "strategic development fund" founded by Najib in 2008 is under intense scrutiny.

"As this newspaper reported on July 2, Malaysian investigators 'have traced nearly US\$700 million of deposits into what they believe are the personal bank accounts of Malaysia's prime minister, Najib Razak'. Neither the original source nor ultimate destination of the money is clear.

"A few weeks earlier, on June 18, this newspaper reported that during the 2013 election 1MDB 'indirectly supported Prime Minister Najib Razak's campaign'.

"The fund paid what appeared to be an inflated price for assets acquired from a Malaysian company; the company then contributed to a Najib-led charity that announced projects, such as aid to schools, that Najib was able to tout as he campaigned.

"After these two stories were published, Najib's office put out a statement that 'there have been concerted efforts by certain individuals to undermine confidence in our economy, tarnish the government and remove a democratically-elected prime minister'.

"It called the Journal articles a 'continuation of this political sabotage'. Not surprisingly, foreign investors are increasingly wary. Malaysia's currency, the ringgit, recently fell to a 16-year low," he said.

'Sowing communal and religious animosity'

The former opposition leader also accused the Najib government of "sowing communal and religious animosity" among the Malays and the country's large ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

He noted the ruling coalition blamed a "Chinese tsunami" for losing the popular vote in the 2013 general election, regardless of a study showing this to be false.

"And despite Najib's claims of moderation internationally, the state-run media have vilified Shiite Islam.

"Last summer the prime minister urged his ruling Umno members to be 'brave' like Islamic State fighters in Iraq, causing him to later explain he doesn't support Islamic State or its radical brand of Islam.

"Such actions undermine the fragile fabric of Malaysia's multiethnic and multireligious society. In four decades in public service I cannot recall a time when racial and religious sensitivities have become so inflamed, and at the same time so poorly managed by the country's political leadership," he added.

Malaysia is ready for change

Anwar also said he remained in Malaysia "to face a difficult third bout of unjust incarceration" because the opposition believed in a brighter future made possible by good governance and the rule of law.

"We believe in the dismantling of Malaysia's system of race-based privileges that has devolved into nothing more than rent-seeking for the privileged few.

"We believe that corruption is a slow bleed that robs future generations of the education and business opportunities that will make them prosper.

"Most important, we are joined by a new generation of young, millennial Malaysians with a commitment to building an inclusive, democratic and economically vibrant country," he added.

Anwar warned of the real danger ahead where middle-income nations like Malaysia - "after several decades of economic mismanagement, opaque governance and overspending" - can devolve into failed states.

"The irresponsible manner in which the current leadership is handling religious issues to curry favor from the extreme right is fueling sectarianism.

"Increased political repression may drive some to give up on the political system altogether and consider extralegal means to cause change, thus creating a tragic, vicious cycle.

"Yet there remains a clear path out of this mess: a return to the underpinnings of the Malaysian Constitution, which preserves and protects the rights of all Malaysians; a devolution of power from the executive, whose role now resembles that of a dictator more than a servant of the people; elections that are truly free and fair; and a free media unafraid to challenge authority," he said.

Anwar believes that Malaysia is ready for change, and this is the reason he chose to remain here instead of fleeing abroad.

"I chose to stay and continue the fight for peaceful, democratic reform from my prison cell. This is not easy and puts a tremendous burden on my family.

"I am grateful for their love and commitment. While I am physically behind bars my spirit remains with them, the people of Malaysia, and people all around the world who continue the struggle for dignity and for freedom," he said.

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