

Anwar vows to unite opposition
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Former ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim has pledged to unite the nation's divided opposition against Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad as he prepares to make his formal return to frontline politics.

In an interview with AFP, Anwar said he hopes to deny Abdullah a majority in general elections through an agreement with other parties not to stand against each other.

Controversially fired as deputy premier nine years ago, he has been making something of a political comeback recently even though he remains barred from elected office and does not yet hold an official party position.

That will all change Sunday if, as expected, he is elected president of the Keadilan party formally led by his wife, Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

"I am still relevant in Malaysian politics," he said in the interview at a suburban Kuala Lumpur house which serves as his office.

He has already been acting as an adviser to the party and led its campaign in a key state by-election last month, although it ended in defeat.

The three-day meeting of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, began today in Seremban.

Agreement over seats

Anwar appeared relaxed, eating a rice pancake and sipping hot milk tea, as he discussed how the opposition could deny the ruling Barisan Nasional a repeat of its overwhelming victory in 2004.

"If elections are held now," he smiled, leaning back in his armchair, "I am quite confident we can deny them a two-third majority."

He said he would coordinate the attack through Keadilan, the Chinese-based DAP and islamic party Pas.

They had previously worked together, but in 2001 DAP fell out with Pas over the latter's goal of forming an Islamic state.

"I am coordinating the opposition and I will initiate negotiations with DAP and Pas," Anwar said.

To conserve limited resources, Keadilan, DAP and Pas would put up just one candidate against Barisan in each constituency, Anwar proposed.

Abdullah's Umno is the dominant group in the BN coalition of 14 parties.

Barisan governments, which have ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957, have traditionally won elections by a large majority.

Anwar had been the heir-apparent to former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad until 1998, when he was sacked after sodomy and corruption charges that landed him in jail for six years.

Keadilan was formed as part of the movement protesting his arrest.

The sodomy conviction has since been overturned but the corruption verdict stands, barring Anwar from standing for public office until April 2008.

General elections must be held by early 2009, but Anwar predicted the vote could be held as early as August - thus preventing him from standing.

He said it would simply mean he would not have to spend energy on winning a seat for himself. "I am not worried. In fact this will allow me to travel the country to woo votes for the opposition."

A firm rejection of Umno

If Anwar is named Keadilan president on Sunday, his previous conviction and sentence mean he is not legally allowed to hold the post.

Keadilan has said it will apply to the registrar of societies which governs political parties to override the ban.

Anwar said he could still be effective even if the bid fails. "I can still work closely to bolster the party with Wan Azizah," he said.

"The focus is to attract more people to join Keadilan. We are a multiracial party," he added.

Analysts saw last month's state by-election in Ijok as a key test for both Keadilan and the BN.

It was the first time Anwar had taken such a prominent political role since his sacking, but the Front won with a slightly increased majority.

Anwar downplayed the setback - "We lost the votes, but not the cause," he said - and analysts say the defeat will not deter him.

A charismatic leader known for his fiery speeches, Anwar insisted there was strong support for his reform agenda and said he had rejected appeals by some senior Umno leaders to return to the party where he was once deputy leader.

"Umno is not prepared for change. I can't go back. I will not compromise my fundamental principles to fight for freedom, justice and equal distribution of wealth."

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