

Analysts: Anwar faces comeback hurdles
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Barred from public office and beset by party grumbles, former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim has big hurdles to overcome if he is to return to the political frontline.

Anwar's unexpected decision over the weekend to withdraw his candidacy for the presidency of the opposition PKR party has left both himself and the movement in a difficult spot, analysts say.

For now the party will continue to be led formally by his wife, Wan Azizah Ismail, after another contender also pulled out of the leadership race at its weekend national congress.

But in the longer term it puts a big question mark over Anwar's attempt to return to Malaysian politics.

"Anwar seems to be facing different sets of pressures now at a time when he cannot afford to lose support," commented Yang Razali Kassim of the School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

PKR has been banking on Anwar's star quality to gain support for the party, whose profile has declined since its creation in the wake of his 1998 sacking from government.

The once heir-apparent to then-prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad was dropped after being jailed for six years following sodomy and corruption charges.

The sodomy charge was overturned in 2004 and Anwar was released, but he is barred from public office or holding any position with a political party until April 2008 because of the corruption conviction.

Anwar said his decision not to run for the leadership of PKR was because of fears its registration could have been cancelled.

"My problem is that the party comes first. 'Anwar' should not be the reason to sacrifice the position of the party," he told the 2,000 delegates.

However he said he would remain as the party's de facto leader behind the scenes, arguing he could still be effective without an official post.

That left some observers sceptical.

"It will be interesting to see what role Anwar will be playing, after all this," independent political analyst Khoo Kay Peng told AFP.

"He has positioned PRK as a party that fights for democracy, but he being a de facto leader is a mockery of democracy.

"It is a political blunder on his part right from the beginning," he said.

Dissent from within

Anwar also had to deal with dissent from insiders after a party official questioned his legitimacy as a prospective leader.

Another prominent party official, S Nallakaruppan, resigned last week, saying Anwar had told him to withdraw from the contest for the party's vice-presidency.

PKR itself is not faring too well as a party. In the last 2004 general elections it won only one parliamentary seat, for Anwar's wife.

"What he is trying to do is to put up a political point that the government is trying to stop him from making a comeback, he is playing a victim's role," Khoo said.

"But core national issues are more important to Malaysians than petty party positions."

Yang Razali said Anwar's ambitions of leading the opposition into the next elections, due by 2009, will stumble if he faces internal conflict.

"He is always known as a bridge-builder for the opposition," the political analyst said, "but even in PKR he is facing dissent, so it does look like the opposition will be affected if he cannot overcome this."

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