

Anwar: No choice but to return to politics
Malaysiakini.com
March 16, 2007
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Former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim took his political comeback to the international media stage on Thursday and said Malaysia was ready for a change.

In an interview with the BBC, Anwar said he has no choice but to return to politics.

"I think we are ready for a change," he said.

"Malaysia has lost its competitiveness. Corruption is endemic, far worse than before," and there are racial tensions, Anwar said.

He was the heir-apparent to former leader Mahathir Mohamad until 1998, when he was sacked after facing sodomy and corruption charges that landed him in jail for six years.

Anwar's sodomy conviction has been overturned but the corruption verdict still stands, barring him from standing for public office until April 2008.

Malaysia must go to the polls by 2009 but the opposition is preparing for an early election which some members say could come as soon as October, effectively preventing Anwar from taking part.

Still, officials in his political party said Sunday he will run for president of the party, Keadilan, the opposition party formally run by his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

"We just want to send a strong signal that he is serious about returning to the political scene in Malaysia, especially as he will be running for the party's presidency and with the (possibility of) elections coming up," Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, special assistant to Anwar, told AFP.

"We don't want to be caught unprepared. We are not discounting that elections could be held from June onwards," Nazmi said, explaining that although Anwar is barred from public office, there is nothing to stop him campaigning.

In the BBC interview meanwhile Anwar said Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who replaced Mahathir in 2003 "has inherited a system and he does not seem to want to change the system."

The Barisan Nasional coalition has ruled Malaysia for almost half a century.

A decent, placid Abdullah

Anwar called Abdullah "a very decent, placid man" but said "the corrupt system is very much in place", the media is not free, and many judicial decisions are compromised.

Anwar has made similar accusations over the past year since switching his focus back to the political scene after leading a nomadic existence with stints lecturing in Britain, the US and Australia after his release from prison in September 2004.

He is also scheduled to be interviewed on the Al Jazeera television network on March 28.

Anwar filed a libel suit early last year against Mahathir after the former prime minister said he could not allow Anwar to become prime minister because Anwar was a homosexual.

In the BBC interview, Anwar said Mahathir - "the king, the master, the maestro" - had felt threatened by him.

Now, Mahathir is "old, very bitter about things," Anwar said.

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