

Anwar kicks off campaign in crucial by-election
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Former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim today kicked off campaigning for a crucial by-election seen as a litmus test of popularity for him as well the country's ruling coalition.

Followed by police cars as he made his way through the rural constituency of Ijok in western Selangor state, Anwar visited a local mosque for Friday prayers before touring several villages in the area.

"The reception has been very good," said a confident Anwar on the campaign trail, where he was warmly welcomed into homes.

"We are encouraged by the friendliness of the people here," he said, after sharing a meal with residents at a village.

Anwar is due to speak at two ceramahs tonight in different parts of Ijok.

The April 28 state by-election is expected to see a fierce fight between the ruling National Front coalition and the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), which Anwar advises.

There was a visible police presence throughout Ijok on Friday, following scuffles between rival supporters as candidates were nominated the previous day.

Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak has said the poll would be a test of the ruling Barisan Nasional's popularity as the country gears up for a general election.

"This by-election is a big test for Umno headquarters and Selangor Umno, although the candidate K Parthiban is from the MIC," Najib was quoted as saying late yesterday by the state Bernama news agency.

"It does not only involve the interest of the MIC, but the interest and image of Umno as well," he said.

Star power

Malaysia is not due for a general election until 2009, but there is widespread speculation that Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will hold an poll before then.

PKR is hoping to use Anwar's star power to gain support in the by-election and for the party, whose profile has flagged since it was created in the wake of his 1998 sacking from government.

The by-election also comes as Anwar stages his political comeback, with intentions to run for president of PKR in May ahead of a general election.

Analysts are flagging a date before April 2008, when Anwar, who has a corruption conviction against him, becomes eligible to stand once again for public office.

"I believe they would call a general election prior to April 2008 to deny me my right to

contest. But that will not deter us from pursuing our agenda," Anwar said.

"Even if I am not contesting ... I will do my utmost to campaign for (PKR)," he said.

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