

'Now give us your vote'
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Hoe Kam Tak cheered along with hundreds of other Chinese as Malaysia's former deputy prime minister took the stage.

"Sure, I recognise him," Hoe, 41, a businessman said. "That is Anwar Ibrahim."

Anwar was sacked and jailed by former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, but is staging a political comeback and campaigned over the weekend for a crucial by-election in rural Ijok constituency, about 50km northwest of Selangor.

Both the Parti Keadilan Rakyat, which he advises, and the ruling Barisan Nasional see this Saturday's vote as a key test ahead of general elections expected before 2009.

Mahathir fired Anwar in 1998 after he faced sodomy and corruption charges that landed him in jail for six years.

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

That has not stopped him from winning over voters in Ijok.

"I like his speeches, especially his push for reform and against corruption. The government talks about it, but there is a lack of action," Hoe said.

Pray for our victory

"Anwar is an honest leader. All the allegations against him are not true," said Sri Banum, 90, who met Anwar as he walked around greeting local traders on Sunday.

Banum held Anwar's arm. "Pray for our victory," he told her.

In nearby Bukit Badong late Saturday, about 2,000 people listened attentively to Anwar's hour-long speech centred on corruption, nepotism and poverty.

"We must declare war on poverty. But billions of dollars are being squandered away. Give a signal to the government that we want a change," he told the noisy crowd.

They responded with a loud "yes" and shouted his battle cry for change: "Reformasi (reform)."

Anwar told the largely Muslim voters that corruption is rampant under the BN coalition, led by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's Umno.

"Where is the rule of law? There is only the rule of the jungle. Umno uses its power in the name of Malays to exploit all of us," he said.

Abdullah says the government is making headway in its anti-corruption fight, and is stepping up efforts to battle the scourge.

MIC member worried

But Anwar's return posed a challenge, said K Karuppiah, a member of the MIC, which is part of the ruling coalition.

"Anwar is a well-known figure. He was not proven guilty. He may secure crucial sympathy votes at our expense," he said.

A state lawmaker's death earlier this month precipitated the by-election in the constituency of 12,372 voters. The ruling coalition won by 1,649 votes over PKR in 2004.

Ijok was once an agricultural-based constituency of rubber and oil palm estates, but is undergoing transition. Many people now work in factories outside the area.

"It is difficult to say how they will vote," said Syed Husin Ali, deputy president of Keadilan. The party is led by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

At a gathering yesterday night in a Chinese restaurant, Anwar vowed support for all the country's ethnic groups.

"I am a Malay leader but I will help all races to acquire economic wealth," Anwar said.

Some Muslim women stood up and cheered as he took to the podium in the packed restaurant.

"Now give us your vote," he urged them.

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