

Back on political stage after lost decade
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A decade after his spectacular fall from grace, former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim has stormed back onto the political stage as the figurehead of the nation's beleaguered opposition. MCPX

Anwar is barred from holding office until April, but has been criss-crossing the country to campaign for today's general elections, rallying his own PKR party and two others which have formed a loose alliance.

He was seen as one of Asia's most talented politicians, and heir apparent to the Malaysian leadership, until 1998 when he was sacked, arrested, convicted on sex and corruption charges and jailed for six years.

The sex charge was later quashed.

anwar ceramah in rembau 150208 anwarNow the 60-year-old has reinvented himself as a major irritant to the ruling party, at the helm of the PKR party which was run by his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail during his years behind bars.

"They can call me an American agent, a sex pervert or corrupt but nothing can change my commitment to serve the people," he roared to about 10,000 people at a political rally in Kuala Lumpur's Lembah Pantai on Thursday night.

The crowd, which brought together majority Malays as well as Chinese and Indian minorities, stood transfixed as he spoke for nearly an hour, despite pouring rain and lightning strikes.

Young and old, women in Muslim headscarves and teenagers in hotpants, many carrying infants and sheltering under umbrellas and plastic sheets, they had waited hours in the rain to hear Anwar's fiery speech.

Close to midnight, the crowd thundered with the battle cry "reformasi, reformasi," the catchcry for change that was coined after his arrest.

Anwar jumped onto the stage, soaked through after hitching a ride on a motorcycle to get to the village which was blocked by a massive traffic jam as more and more people made their way to the rally.

He attacked Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's economic policies and his failure to tackle corruption, and said the government would stoop to electoral fraud to counter a groundswell of support for the opposition.

"You can cheat as much as you want, but you cannot change the will of the people," he said. "Give us your votes, you will not be betrayed."

PKR can reach all races

Anwar's goal is for the opposition to secure 75 of the 222 parliamentary seats, to deprive

the coalition led by Umno of the two-thirds majority that allows it to amend the constitution at will.

Pollsters say it is more likely that the opposition parties will double their presence to some 40 seats, but that Anwar's real achievement is to garner support from across Malaysia's racial spectrum.

"Anwar has done a good job in terms of being able to organise a national campaign," said Bridget Welsh, a Southeast Asia expert at Johns Hopkins University, who is here for the elections.

"PKR as a party is trying to reach across the races, and long term that potentially gives it the power to be able to govern."

lembah pantai nomination day 240208 hugsOn the hustings, Anwar has been joined by his 27-year-old daughter, Nurul Izzah Anwar (photo, left), who is contesting the Lembah Pantai constituency against a coalition heavyweight, Umno's Shahrizat Abdul Jalil (photo, right).

The 'puteri reformasi' was just a youngster when her father was jailed but has since earned a masters degree from Johns Hopkins University in the United States, and served as her father's political coordinator.

"When I meet people on my campaign rounds, I know they are curious to see me. They want to know what Anwar's daughter is up to, what does she have to say," Nurul Izzah told AFP.

Anwar has said he plans to return to parliament through a by-election in a PKR-held seat after April, but Nurul Izzah said she is serious about her political career and will not be merely Anwar's proxy.

"It began with my father but in the process, the party has developed into an organisation that stands and fights for justice and I hope I can carry that message to voters and stand as an individual," she said.

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