

Anwar marks end of political ban
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Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim will tomorrow celebrate his official return to the political stage, as a ban from public office expires a decade after he was sacked as deputy prime minister. MCPX

The lifting of the ban marks the end of an extraordinary saga that saw Anwar convicted on sex and corruption charges and spend six years in jail, before storming back to prominence in historic March elections.

anwar pc in hong kong 130208With Anwar at the helm, a reinvigorated opposition seized a third of parliamentary seats and five states in the worst ever showing for the Barisan Nasional coalition that has ruled for half a century.

Now the 60-year-old maverick is once again being touted as a future prime minister, but this time for his Pakatan Rakyat opposition alliance which he has described as a 'government-in-waiting'.

Anwar had been expected to re-enter parliament quickly through a by-election in one of the seats held by his Keadilan party, and to challenge Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in a symbolic no-confidence vote soon after.

He's in no hurry to be MP

But in light of the stunning and unexpected gains, although he is eligible to run for office from Tuesday, he has said he is in no hurry to act.

"Certainly not in the next few months," he said in a weekend interview with The Star daily. "Building up an effective, credible Pakatan Rakyat is to my mind far more important for now."

"My number-one priority is to ensure accountability and good governance in maintaining the five states."

Anwar said the expiry of the political ban "has no significance in my mind" because he does not recognise the decision of the court which convicted him of corruption.

But PKR is nevertheless holding a major rally on Monday evening, with thousands of supporters of Anwar's campaign for 'Reformasi' (Reform) expected to attend to hear him speak.

"It will be a huge gathering of all our supporters, of what we call the Reformasi crowd, people who have been struggling for the past 10 years," Keadilan's information chief Tian Chua told AFP.

"Of course we feel that our struggle has been redeemed and recognised, and we are optimistic that our agenda for reform can be implemented," said Tian Chua, who is also a newly minted parliamentarian in the March 8 polls.

Abdullah has refused to stand down despite the electoral debacle, insisting he has a mandate to rule and promising to introduce the reforms which he promised years ago but was punished for never delivering.

Umno to continue to flounder

But the opposition and many political commentators believe the coalition led by Abdullah's Umno will continue to flounder and that Anwar could seize power within a few years, or perhaps even a few months.

"I think they are very likely to form the next government and it's a matter of timing, of when this will take place, whether it's at the next elections or before then," said Tricia Yeoh of the Centre for Public Policy Studies.

Anwar has said that coalition lawmakers from Sabah and Sarawak states on Borneo island are interested in switching sides, a prospect that could quickly unseat the government, but Yeoh said he will let the dust settle first.

"There are too many seismic shifts taking place in too short a period and they do want to have a stable handover. If it were to take place, they would want the economy and tourism to be stable," she said.

The prospect of Anwar seizing the top job is an astonishing twist in a story that saw him hauled to court, dealt a black eye in a beating by the police chief, and the subject of lurid testimony over sex charges that were later dropped.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the former premier who ruled Malaysia with an iron fist for two decades, can barely contain his irritation over the change in fortunes of his one-time protegee who he sacked after months of discord over economic policy.

"He shouldn't kid himself into thinking he is very popular. He is not popular," he told reporters yesterday.