

Anwar's political battle rages on
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Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's de facto opposition leader, is locked in a political battle of wills with ruling coalition leaders and determined to wrest federal control despite fresh charges of sodomy brought up against him.
MCPX

Anwar hopes that parliamentary defections from the ruling Barisan Nasional will enable the three-party opposition Pakatan Rakyat to seize power by Sept16, but so far there has been little to show.

Anwar says he will contest in a by-election soon, timing his announcement to coincide with news of defections to the opposition alliance. Many observers concede it will not be easy to lure the 30 parliamentarians needed to seize federal control. The BN has a 140-81 majority in Parliament, with one independent.

But some Pakatan leaders appear to be hoping that an initial spate of defections could snowball and encourage others to cross over.

anwar ibrahim and ahmad shabery cheek debate 150708Two weeks ago, Anwar took part in an unprecedented 'live' debate with the information minister over a 41 percent hike in the price of petrol. He said that if Pakatan took over, it would immediately reduce oil prices.

"The petrol price is hurting the poor and marginalised groups, aggravating their suffering. It is our responsibility. Such a sharp rise is burdening the people. If Umno and the ruling coalition don't realise this, then their future is bleak," said Anwar.

His opponent, Shabery Cheek, argued that the rise in oil prices was a global phenomenon, while criticising Anwar's previous role in government.

Internet polls, however, indicated that more than 95 percent of those who responded felt that Anwar was more convincing in his arguments that Malaysia, as a net exporter of oil, could afford to lower prices for now.

Celebrations, if any, had to be put on hold. The former deputy premier was arrested the following day in dramatic fashion by a team of balaclava-clad police personnel one hour ahead of a police deadline for him to report to the police station.

He had his statement recorded in connection with the sodomy complaint made by a former aide in his PKR, was taken to the hospital for an examination and spent the night in a police cell before being released the next morning.

But the authorities face a dilemma. Charging Anwar for sodomy again - just as he was a decade ago, until the Federal Court overturned the decision - risks raising public ire. Scenes of a mattress being lugged in and out of court back then are still the butt of many jokes. Anwar himself is upset he has been denied a copy of the police report lodged against him by the aide.

Ruling party politicians including the prime minister and his son-in-law have publicly called on Anwar to submit his DNA sample to assist in investigations.

Anwar refuses, saying he fears that his DNA could be planted and the details in the complaint or police report amended, especially since the authorities have access to the complainant. Besides, he points out, he had given his DNA sample several times after he was first arrested ten years ago.

Government losing credibility fast

Many among the public are not impressed with the way the authorities are handling the case.

The government is insulting the intelligence of the public, wrote a Kenny Gan in a comment on a political blog: "Not giving Anwar a copy of the police report. Leaders joining in to pressure Anwar to give a fresh blood sample for DNA testing when none may be required. Then we have the PM saying the 1998 sample is too old which takes the cake. Too old for what? Planting evidence?"

A full-blown trial would also focus public attention on the judiciary, itself the subject of a royal commission of inquiry following the revelation of a video which caught a prominent senior lawyer allegedly brokering judicial appointments and promotions with a top judge and speaking of political and business intermediaries involved in the process.

The perceived lack of credibility of the institutions of governance, prevalent corruption and the rising cost of living fueled disenchantment among many Malaysians and led to the BN losing a clutch of seats in the general elections in March. Five out of 13 states in the country also fell into opposition hands.

In a sense, Malaysian society and politics have been moving in opposite directions, observes political commentator Khoo Boo Teik.

On the one hand, he points out society has moved, albeit unsteadily, towards more open political dissent. "Demands for greater political space and freedom have mounted, backed by mass readiness to mobilise, protest and demonstrate with lesser fear of repression," he wrote in a cover story for *Aliran Monthly*, a current affairs magazine published by *Aliran*, a social reform group.

"This dissent has been half-tolerated, half-repressed, evidence of a stand-off between the regime and the opposition, between state and civil society."

On the other hand, politics has become more sordid: the system is flush with money, soiled by character assassination, and riddled with conspiracies. The stakes of office have been raised, the rules of competition bent, and the conduct of politicians often unchecked by institutionalised controls, he pointed out.

"One might say that society has moved ahead of politics and a large proportion of the people have advanced beyond the control of the political class."

Therein lies the rub. The political situation is now in a critical stage as demands for change and openness have locked horns with the old order which, while being aware of these demands, is reluctant to concede too much.

But many Malaysians also want their leaders to move on and tackle pressing economic issues such as the rising cost of living.

"I get the distinct impression that people are getting fed up with the political maneuvering that is going on in Malaysia," says academic and political commentator Farish Noor.

He says an article that he wrote urging politicians to get back to the 'boring' task of governance is being widely circulated over the Internet, including social networking sites such as Facebook.

"I was surprised, but it tells you something: it's high time the Malaysian government gets back to the business of governance."

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