

**Sodomy II: A case of deja vu**  
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Exactly a decade ago, Malaysia was in the economic doldrums, former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim faced sodomy charges, and disbelieving citizens suspected a government conspiracy. MCPX

Fast forward to 2008 - Anwar has reinvented himself as the figurehead of a thriving opposition, and the country has a serious case of deja vu.

anwar ibrahim sodomy 2 trail court case 080808 06The economy is in a rut, Anwar faces another lurid court case on the same charge, and a majority of Malaysians are convinced the ruling coalition concocted the allegations to once again sabotage his political ambitions.

"People have come to the conclusion that the closer he is to wanting to obtain power, the more difficult others will make it for him to achieve that," said Tricia Yeoh from the Centre for Public Policy Studies.

"A lot of people are very tired, after living through the first sodomy trial... which had a chilling effect on the country, even until today. People thought it was blatant political manoeuvring," she said.

### **Extraordinary feat**

The first time around, Anwar's downfall came after he challenged veteran ruler Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The second time, he was struck down after landmark elections that he said put him within striking distance of seizing power.

The United States and rights group Amnesty International have raised concern over the new charges against Anwar, who was originally convicted in a trial that saw him brought to court with a black eye after a vicious beating from the police chief.

He spent six years in jail until 2004 when the nation's highest court overturned the conviction, allowing him to begin campaigning for his PKR party which now leads a three-member opposition alliance.

In March it pulled off an extraordinary feat in general elections, seizing one third of parliamentary seats and five states in the most serious challenge ever faced by the coalition which has ruled for half a century.

Shortly after, Anwar shocked the political elite by saying he would soon form a new administration with the help of defecting government lawmakers - he needs 30 to switch sides.

anwar ibrahim sodomy 2 trail court case 080808 05The timing of the new charges, days after the charismatic 61-year-old announced he would contest a by-election to return to parliament, has fuelled suspicions of a conspiracy.

A recent survey found just 11 percent of Malaysians believe the accusations that he sodomised a 23-year-old man who was a volunteer at his office.

A full 66 percent believe it is a "politically motivated action to disrupt Anwar Ibrahim's political career", according to the Merdeka Centre poll of 1,030 people last month.

And in sentiments that mirror those of a decade ago, only 33 percent said they had confidence in the judiciary and police who will determine Anwar's fate.

### **The gov't out 'to fix him'**

Malaysians interviewed at a Kuala Lumpur petrol station, where they filled up after a recent 41 percent price hike, had strikingly similar views, accusing the government of staging a sideshow to deflect attention from economic woes.

"The new sodomy charges against Anwar Ibrahim are all a political game because he is now a real threat to the prime minister," said Abdul Halim, a 28-year-old designer.

Businessman Mohamad Fazli Farid said the government should focus instead on the plight of ordinary workers who are unable to cope with high fuel and food prices on chronically low wages.

"Anwar was cleared of all the sodomy charges before so what are they trying to prove now? We have all grown up in the last 10 years and people are not so stupid to just accept all these things blindly," he said.

Sodomy is a serious offence which carries a penalty of 20 years imprisonment in Malaysia. But the graphic charges do not appear to have dented his popularity.

In the electorate of Permatang Pauh in Anwar's home state, which is expected to return him to office on Aug 26, voters said they were even more determined to support him.

"It looks like the government is out to fix him again. Everyone knows that the charge against him is nothing but a lie," said 46-year-old Suhaimi Samsuddin.

"The only thing we can do now is to vote for Anwar and make sure he gets to parliament and eventually form the government. Only then can we right all that is wrong in this country."