

PKR leader's popularity undimmed by sodomy charges
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It was a humid, sweltering afternoon in Permatang Pauh on mainland Penang state in northern Malaysia, the scene of what could prove to be a pivotal by-election for the country on Aug 26. MCPX

A lunch-time Malay-Muslim crowd was filling up a restaurant by the mainroad. Some appeared to be office workers while others looked as if they were from out of town. Women with headscarves sat with their families; a couple of them wore smart office attire without headscarves. Men with smart, bright batik wear stood in contrast with villagers in more traditional Malay attire with white skull caps.

anwar ibrahim taman pauh event 100808 01Thursday, Aug 7, might have been just another day here in this semi-rural town - but it was not. Hours earlier in the sessions court in the national capital, Kuala Lumpur, Anwar Ibrahim, candidate for Permatang Pauh, was charged with consensual sodomy with a party aide Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan on June 26.

Anwar was released on a personal bond and his case is now due for mention on Sep 10 - six days before the targeted deadline of Sep16 which the high-profile opposition leader had set for seizing federal power by encouraging defections from ruling party ranks.

A day earlier on Aug 6, the Election Commission fixed nomination day on Aug 16 and polling day on Aug 26. Anwar, a former deputy prime minister, was served with a letter asking him to appear in court on Wednesday as well.

Free to campaign

There was some doubt whether he would be granted bail and be free to campaign. Anwar's release comes as a huge relief for his PKR as it gears up for the election campaign in Permatang Pauh, which coincidentally borders the Kepala Batas constituency of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Both constituencies, surrounded by sprawling paddy fields, traditional Malay villages, and low to medium-income housing, lie on mainland Penang, which, along with four other states fell to opposition hands in a watershed general election in March.

Also this is the first time since 1969 that a government led by the monolithic Umno party does not enjoy two-thirds majority in Parliament. Anwar was a member of the Umno till 1998 when the first sodomy charge was brought up against him. It took until 2004 when a court overturned those charges and he was released from jail.

wan azizah permatang pauh 281004The Permatang Pauh seat fell vacant when Anwar's wife and Parliamentary opposition leader Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail resigned to allow him an opportunity to re-enter Parliament after an absence of 10 years.

Earlier, a doctor at a private hospital in Kuala Lumpur who had examined Saiful on June 28 found no trace of sodomy and referred him to a government hospital for further examination. The top management of the private hospital later suggested that the doctor, Mohamed Osman

Abdul Hamid, was not qualified to examine sodomy cases.

But in a sworn statement, purportedly from Osman, said, "I strongly stand firm on my findings."

Political persecution

Anwar, for his part, wondered aloud: "If (the alleged sodomy) is consensual, why was I the only one being charged? This is political persecution."

Before appearing in court, he said the propaganda and the plot hatched by the ruling elites, especially those close to the prime minister, were irresponsible.

"Their greed for power has made them capable of undermining national institutions and democracy in the country," he said in a statement. "It proves that they are facing a moral crisis and a crisis of confidence."

Human rights groups have called on the Malaysian government to withdraw the sodomy charges.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch said in a statement that the investigation process showed the charges were "aimed at preventing Anwar from leading a new government" and that "the Malaysian government appears to be manipulating the legal system to shore up support for its continued rule and undermine the opposition".

dap islamic state roundtable 100807 farish noor Political scientist and historian Farish Noor told IPS that the entire population of Malaysia was going to be forced to witness the re-enactment of a grotesque drama that was seen as "vulgar, obscene and humiliating" the first time it was performed 10 years ago.

"However, this time around, the Malaysian public is no longer amused or titillated by this sordid allegation; rather, they are disgusted," he said.

The public was now politically wiser and realises that there are many other economic and structural issues that demand their attention, he observed. The main issue, said Farish, was the slow progress in judicial and police reforms and anti-corruption measures.

Farish said he does not think Abdullah was involved in the latest allegation.

"But by allowing the situation to degenerate so far, he is indirectly responsible."

Tough times

"They are always wanting to charge Anwar and he has been going in and out of the police stations and the courts," said an Indian-Muslim private security guard, who preferred not to be identified.

"But what they don't realise is that people like us are carrying a heavy burden."

"I earn about RM800-900 a month (barely above the official poverty line). How on earth are we to survive when the oil price hike has triggered a round of price increases? Now I hear even the

bus fares might rise. Things were more tolerable during the Mahathir era."

Many have been drawn by Anwar's promise to reduce fuel prices "the very next day after we come to power" - a promise made easier to fulfil now that global oil prices have been sliding.

anwar ibrahim sodomy 2 trail court case 080808 05Anwar had earlier set the Sept 16 target for taking over the federal government on the assumption that he and the opposition People's Alliance (PR) coalition could lure enough parliamentarians from the ruling coalition to defect.

Permatang Pauh has already generated huge attention from the rest of the country.

"People from all over the country are coming here now," said a roadside fruit vendor selling local favourites such as the hairy red rambutans and spiky, pungent durians.

"There are even people coming here from Sabah and Sarawak," in north Borneo, across the South China Sea.

Even before Anwar was charged, an Internet poll revealed that 85 percent of over 3,000 respondents felt that Anwar would win with a much bigger majority.

Cartoonist Zunar, the editor of the PKR party newspaper, feels the action against Anwar would backfire on the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition.

"It's not a smart move politically because it now makes it easier for Anwar at Permatang Pauh. People will punish the BN heavily because of this episode," he said.

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