

Is Anwar Ibrahim a reformist?
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Most bloggers cannot resist writing a post on Anwar Ibrahim's second sodomy charge. Now, it is no longer important trying to guess whether he did it or not. Even if the accusation actually took place, both Mohd Saiful Bukhari and several politicians only have themselves to blame for allowing it to be politicised.

MCPX

Anwar Ibrahim is not just a politician. He is a politician who has made the biggest impact in the history of Malaysian politics. What others had tried but failed, to make a dent on BN's armour, Anwar has succeeded in making the coalition looking afraid and fragile.

anwar ibrahim exclusive pre permatang pauh interview 130808 08Today, almost all of the main component parties in BN are facing a grim outlook of being rendered irrelevant especially those which claimed to represent the minorities. It is not inaccurate to say that none of these parties are reviewing their position in the coalition at present moment. The question is will the Anwar's prosecution be the last straw that breaks the camel's back.

There are a few critical concerns which faced these parties. First, Abdullah's eroding popularity is a key concern despite his reiteration to commit to his reform agenda. At the moment, his fellow partners in BN are not sure if the power transition was brokered as an effort to allow Abdullah to ease the pressure on him to step down. His deputy Najib Razak, himself besieged by another controversy, was ready to accept the plan because he needed the time to ride through his own storm.

Unfortunately, the overt eagerness of the authorities to press charges against Anwar has implicated both leaders. Abdullah is seen as playing the same lead role like Dr Mahathir in the first sodomy case against Anwar. Najib had openly admitted to meeting Mohd Saiful at his residence before the latter lodged a police report against Anwar. Both leaders have challenged Anwar to take a voluntary DNA test and to make an Islamic swearing to clear his name, knowing how easy religion can be politicised in Malaysia.

Apparently, some pundits claimed that Anwar's reluctance to do the swearing has affected his credibility but survey results showed that only 11 percent of the respondents believed he committed the crime. PAS, his Islamic partner in the newly minted People's Alliance coalition, is backing him, although some of its leaders who were worried about the allegations got involved in a Malay-Muslim unity dialogue with Umno to hedge their bets.

Sodomy cases backfire

With the investigation team not making much headway in the case, the prosecutors will have to rely heavily on complainant's testimony (words). Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar readily admitted that this is the prime reason for not charging Saiful with a similar offence since it is consensual.

anwar ibrahim and saiful bukhari azlan sodomy allegationsHowever, Saiful's liaison with Najib has thrown a political spin into the case and risks tainting his own credibility. Meanwhile, the first doctor who examined Saiful, Dr Mohd Osman Abdul Hamid, stands by his medical results.

Efforts to link Dr Osman to Anwar's circle are fruitless because the doctor was not told who the complainant was trying to implicate during the check-up and he had referred the complainant to the KL General Hospital for a second opinion after being told of the criminal intention.

Anwar's importance to the PR coalition is indisputable. This explains why the authorities were too eager to pin a charge on him and in the process complicated and implicated a number of BN top leaders. With public opinion clearly siding Anwar, it is impossible to know the truth without having the findings being disputed and politicised. In the end, it is not possible to find out the root cause of what is obviously a charge mooted from a clumsy investigation.

Second, perception is crucial in politics. In the past, most of the component parties believed that Umno was the backbone of the coalition which can ensure them perpetual electoral victories. Umno is still the backbone of the coalition but it can no longer guarantee electoral successes for its component partners.

Caught in time warp

BN which was promoted as a successful formula for multiracial tolerance and cooperation has lost its lustre for its failure to evolve with times. Most of the communal based parties in the coalition are pre-independence relics and they do not offer much ideological options for Malaysians caught in the process of globalisation. While most Malaysians are searching for a shared identity and a sense of belonging, these parties are more interested to sustain the social compartmentalisation of the colonial era.

Ironically, the man they now fear most, Anwar Ibrahim, was a product of such a political system. Anwar, when first drafted into Umno, was the epitome of a Malay-Muslim icon. He happily played this role and simultaneously ascended the throne of his party to become the youngest heir apparent to Dr Mahathir all in less than a decade.

mahathir interview 050308 Anwar was able to provide the necessary ethno-religious credentials sorely lacked by the Mahathir administration. He was credited for his ability to shore back PAS's rise in the early 80's amidst the Islamic revolution in the Middle East. Dr Mahathir was seen as too westernised and capitalistic to do the job. Interestingly, during the fallout between the two leaders Dr Mahathir attacked Anwar's morality as a weapon to contain him and temporarily halt his political career.

The first sodomy charge against Anwar was more than just a crime against sexual misconduct. It was the beginning of Anwar's transformation and reinvention from an ethno-religious icon to "the voice of democracy" through his new platform, the PKR.

During his tenure in Umno holding various ministerial portfolios, Anwar was a bitter foe to many opposition leaders including DAP stalwart Lim Kit Siang and others. His tough stance against some vernacular educationists when he was a minister of education had created distrust amongst the Chinese community against him. Until the last general election, his critics were still unsure if Anwar was going to go back to Umno despite his repeated assurances.

In fact, regardless whether it was right or wrong, a number of non-Malays were actually relieved when it was apparent that Anwar's career was to be halted by his imprisonment. They saw in him a charismatic leader who was prone to autocratic rule. His ethno-religious credentials added to their fear after having suffered decades of communal marginalisation.

Known to many as a charismatic speaker, Anwar was to prove to his critics wrong and to demonstrate that he is an agile politician who can reinvent his image and political messages to capitalise on obvious disgruntlement and dissatisfaction in the society.

Anwar used his prosecution as a cause to fight against injustices and gross abuses of power in the country. A number of key institutions, such as the police, the judiciary and the anti-corruption agency, were under public scrutiny. In the end, many would agree that Anwar played a crucial role in catalysing and uniting civil movements in the Malaysia.

After the 1999 "Reformasi" campaign, civil society organisations and individuals took a more prominent position in socio-political discourse of the country. Malaysians were greeted with more sources of independent information which coincided with the start of internet activism.

New vision, new hope

Anwar understood that the non-Malays were not satisfied with Umno's political demeanour for a long time. Their main complaint was the perpetuation of the New Economic Policy which was deemed unfair and discriminatory. He gave them his vision of a New Malaysian Agenda which was need based and not race based.

anwar ibrahim penang kg kota permatang pauh by election campaign 140808 06Malaysians long looking for a charismatic Malay leader who is willing to champion their cause and breach the racial boundaries slowly warmed up to Anwar's leadership. Anwar is doing what Syed Hussien Alatas did when he was the founding president of Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia. He took the risk which gave him a segment of support that was lost to both BN and Umno.

Similarly, opposition parties such as the DAP and PAS saw in Anwar Ibrahim a leader who can help to achieve their dreams to break BN's stranglehold on Malaysian electoral politics. For them, Anwar gave them a glue (leadership) to bind them in a coalition regardless how disparate their political ideologies are. Both, through this partnership, have achieved electoral successes beyond their imagination.

Unfortunately, we will never know whether Anwar Ibrahim will pursue the same political direction he did now if there was no animosity against him in Umno. If Anwar was loyal to Mahathir and eventually succeeded him, will there be a New Malaysian Agenda or "Ketuanan Rakyat" (People's Supremacy)?

Clearly, the threat (Anwar) facing BN now was its own creation. The only difference is Anwar is not susceptible to change but BN (especially Umno) is still caught in their time warp. Their reluctance to change was manifested in Umno's insistence to continue the Malay-Muslim unity dialogue with PAS to the disdain of its partners in BN. BN did not lose because there was Malay disunity. On the contrary, it lost because it had failed to give a representation to all Malaysians.

Anwar's second sodomy trial is again more than just a sexual misconduct trial. It will provide a decisive answer to the question on whether Umno can change its spots. It is a trial against old perverted Malaysia which still embraces draconian laws and a new Malaysia which is attuned to the realities of 21st century.

With Umno top leaders still unwilling to allow space for social and intellectual discourse in some of the most complex issues confronting a multiracial Malaysia such as religion and race, there is not much hope that the party can change its spots. Its partners are on their edge of their seat to find out if the coalition is still relevant.

Hence, is Anwar our "voice of democracy" and the foremost reformist? The society is waiting to find out.

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