

**'Arif a good choice but he can't beat Anwar'**  
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Dr Mahathir Mohamad praised Barisan Nasional's choice of candidate, Arif Shah Omar Shah, but said he does not think the latter can defeat opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim in the Permatang Pauh by-election.  
MCPX

"I think Arif Shah will not lose as badly as other candidates before him or other candidates in his place," Mahathir was quoted as saying in the Star today.

At best, Arif Shah would only be able to reduce Anwar's majority even though his Chinese education background may win him some non-Malay votes, Mahathir said.

Permatang Pauh, normally a quiet northern town, was transformed into a hotspot this morning, when thousands of wildly-cheering supporters accompanied their candidates including Arif Shah and Anwar to the Tuanku Bainun Teaching Institute to file in their nomination papers.

It will be a three-cornered fight for the parliamentary seat, which fell vacant when PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail resigned to pave the way for Anwar to return to parliament and make a stab for the prime ministership of the country.

The three candidates who registered for the Aug 26 by-election are Arif Shah, Anwar and Hanafi Hamat, president of PAS splinter party Angkatan Keadilan Insan Malaysia (Akim).

### **Dirty fight**

But by and large, the battle will be between Arif Shah and Anwar. An all-out, no-holds-barred dogfight is expected as the stakes are high. The by-election is seen as a litmus test not just for Anwar, who has been dogged by a sexual scandal, but also for the BN which is struggling to stem a loss in popularity.

Many Malaysians regard Anwar as having the best chance of toppling the ruling BN coalition, currently led by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Anwar's opposition alliance Pakatan Rakyat scored their biggest win in the March polls, winning 82 out of a total 222 seats and denying the BN of their long-held two-thirds majority.

Anwar has promised to reverse that majority and form a new government by Sept 16.

But the 61-year old has been charged for sodomising his former personal aide Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan and still faces what could be a lengthy and embarrassing trial.

Just a day ago, Saiful dealt Anwar a fresh blow by swearing on the Quran that the latter had sodomised him.

Anwar, who claims the charges were politically framed to stop him from taking power, has

questioned Saiful's timing. Pakatan ally Abdul Hadi Awang, who is also PAS president, too has criticised Saiful's move as an act of 'kebodohan' (stupidity).

Meanwhile, political observers say it is still too early to gauge how much damage Saiful's religious oath will do to Anwar, but believe he still has the upperhand over Arif Shah for now.

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