

Umno may have found its match in Anwar
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Abdar Rahman Koya

If the trend of powerful political parties expiring after fifty years' rule is anything to go by, then Malaysia's ruling United Malays National Organisation (Umno), in power since the country's independence from Britain in 1957, had better be prepared.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim is thought to be close to carrying out his now-familiar threat to engineer a mass-defection of government MPs and show Umno the door - long before the next general elections due in 2012. His threat seems to be real, especially now that he has embarrassed the government and grabbed a resounding victory in a by-election on Aug 26, barely six months after the setbacks suffered by the Umno-led Barisan Nasional coalition in the last general elections.

The by-election on August 26, tagged the "mother of all by-pkr and umno supporters quarrel over banners 230808 uitm 2elections" by both opposition and government supporters, followed a gruelling, multi-million-dollar campaigning by Umno in Permatang Pauh, a semi-urban multiracial town in the northern state of Penang. Anwar obtained a majority bigger than that won last March by Dr Wan Azizah Ismail, his wife, who vacated the seat she had held while Anwar was in prison, thereby paving the way for her husband's official return to Malaysia's political stage.

The result shows that the Malays' political loyalty - and indeed the respect they have for the ruling Umno - had been affected badly by Anwar's dismissal and his launch of the reformasi movement, and indeed it now seems to be lost almost permanently.

But all that was more than ten years ago; such a loss in Malay support is worse now because of the almost complete desertion of the ruling coalition by the non-Malays, namely the Chinese and Indians, caused by a number of factors, the most important of which is the perceived discrimination against them in the distribution of the socio-economic pie.

No amount of assurance by government leaders that judicial and economic reforms will take place has removed the suspicion that change can only come through Anwar and the coalition of parties he leads. That the larger show of support comes at a time of intense propaganda against Anwar's character also confirms how little credibility (scarcely any) the ruling party has managed to retain since 1998/99, which is when Mahathir allegedly orchestrated the campaign to destroy his deputy's political career.

Umno finds its match

This time around, even an oath sworn upon the Qur'an by the accuser in the latest sodomy allegation against Anwar, which was broadcast repeatedly during television news bulletins almost every day throughout the campaign, had failed to persuade voters to forsake Anwar. The result is that a clear line has been drawn, and for the first time in Malaysia's history the government, despite all the machinery on its side, has found its match. umno special briefing abdullah ahmad badawi announce resignation date 100708 03

Although Anwar could not have pulled off such a feat without the full support of the Islamic PAS and the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), the fact is that neither

could the two opposition partners have achieved the kind of political storm that is now rapidly changing Malaysia.

The by-election marks Anwar's return to active politics. But Anwar, a shrewd politician whose rise from student leader to the number-two man in the government has been meteoric, returning to politics the day he was released in September 2004.

This by-election victory, more than filling the void left by Dr Wan Azizah, not only brings Anwar back to parliament, but also answers the question of whether he can really get a decisive margin with which to implement his plan to take power by means of defections in parliament.

Now, with that endorsement in hand, the one-time prime-minister-in-waiting has never been any closer to the seat he was supposed to occupy ten years ago. The physical proximity is also true literally: as the parliamentary opposition leader, he now sits in parliament face-to-face with prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

But being an opposition leader has never been his intention, something he indirectly made clear days after the opposition coalition denied the Umno-led government its traditional two-thirds parliamentary majority, in the general elections on March 8. He had then already started talking about toppling the ruling coalition.

At that point, such talk was met with cynicism from both friends and foes. Even if he was bluffing then, however, his recent election victory looks set to prove the cynics wrong, especially when it has become clear that support for him has peaked in spite (or because) of the latest campaign to vilify him with yet more allegations of sodomy.

Roller coaster ride

Anwar may be on the verge of once again climbing up the final rungs of the prime ministerial ladder, a simple task that suddenly became Herculean a decade ago. That is all the more reason for him to exercise a little more caution, because having had to take a sudden plunge at the height of his career is something which has happened before, more than once in his almost forty years of political activism. His political life, after all, has been like a roller-coaster ride.

When elections fail to play their role, the defection of MPs acts as a release-valve in parliamentary democracy. For now, Anwar seems bent on going for the kill before another downhill road suddenly opens up in front of him. For that alone, Sept 2008 may or may not be Malaysia's longest month in politics.

And even if Sept 16 – the date Anwar has chosen for Umno's grand exit – passes by like any other rainy September day in Malaysia, it can mean any of these three things: that Anwar was only bluffing; that he failed; or that Umno is surviving on borrowed time.

The author is a former news editor at PAS organ Harakah. This article was written for London-based Islamic political newsmagazine, Crescent International.