

**Pak Lah-Anwar impasse headed for a climax**  
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The growing impasse between Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Anwar Ibrahim may come to a head soon, with both sides finding a way forward after the prime minister gave a public assurance that he would not arrest "Anwar or anyone else" under the country's draconian Internal Security Act.

Experts interviewed by Malaysiakini were of the view a climax - one way or another - was in sight. They said the public, already unhappy with the sinking economic conditions, was losing patience and it was now up to the two camps to put up or shut up.

abdullah ahmad badawi najib razak pc change portfolio 170908 06Abdullah would have to decide if he wanted to be remembered as the man who liberalised democracy in Malaysia or leave behind a legacy of oppression and intimidation.

Anwar, on the other hand, would have to prove he has the support of the parliamentarians that he has been claiming to have or lose a huge chunk of credibility with voters.

"It may be approaching the end game. All the strategies they have been able to come out with are almost all played out except for the final few.

"It is not clear yet what those could be. However, like a game of chess, it is going to be just a few more moves," said Jacob Ramsay, political analyst for South East Asia at Singapore-based Control Risks Group.

"I think Abdullah coming out and saying he will not use the ISA was a breakthrough," said Ramon Navaratnam, chairperson of the Center for Public Policy Studies.

"It will stop all this speculation that is debilitating the economy and causing anxiety. When the prime minister makes a transparent statement like this, it calms the atmosphere and encourages public confidence - this is good for the country."

### **No to emergency sitting**

Efforts by the opposition leader to form a new government have been met with stiff resistance from Abdullah's Barisan Nasional coalition, in particular his Umno party - which has called the shots in the country since independence from the British in 1957.

anwar ibrahim pc call for emergency parliament meeting 180908 04Anwar, whose Pakatan Rakyat alliance scored a major triumph by winning 82 out of 222 parliamentary seats in the March general election, is banking on defections from the Barisan camp to reverse the current majority in his favour.

Claiming that at least 31 BN lawmakers were waiting to cross over to his side, he has asked for an emergency parliamentary session to be convened next Tuesday, Sept 23, to debate a no-confidence vote against the premier.

Abdullah immediately rejected the request, asking Anwar to wait until Parliament resumes

on Oct 13 - a reply that analysts said was reasonable given that the motion was to topple him.

"October is only a month away. There was a rush on the part of Pakatan to ask for the emergency session to pre-empt any arrest. Now there is this assurance, they should be able to wait until and let the due democratic process take place," said Navaratnam.

The 68-year old Abdullah, who a day ago described Anwar as a threat to national security, sparked fears the latter could soon be arrested under the ISA. Known for his amiable and humble ways, Abdullah had shocked the nation when police officers arrested three civilians under the tough security law last week.

"I think there is still a lot of uncertainty but Anwar is looking like he may pull it off. There are a couple of things that could however derail him - the implicit use of the ISA against him and the sodomy charges," said Ramsay.

The ISA, which allows for prolonged police detention without trial, is normally reserved for terrorists.

### **Worst case**

Anwar, a former deputy prime minister and finance minister, is due to return to court on Sept 24 where he faces charges of having sodomised an ex-personal aide.

The 61-year old has pleaded not guilty and says the allegations are trumped up by enemies to kill his political comeback.

Meanwhile, the Pakatan - consisting of the DAP, PAS and PKR parties - is due to hold an emergency meeting to discuss its next course of action.

If it chooses not to wait until next month, then its next recourse would be to see the King, Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin.

agong power in the change of government 170908Under Malaysian law, the king has the right to accept and formalise any new government that can show proof of sufficient mandate in Parliament.

He can also order fresh election if the prime minister - either outgoing or incoming - recommends it.

"The toppling of the Barisan Nasional government by getting the allegiance of the majority of the 222 members of parliament to support a Pakatan Rakyat federal government is neither subversion nor organised violence," said DAP supremo Lim Kit Siang in a statement.

"In fact, the toppling of the government-of-the-day is part and parcel of the democratic process if the government-of-the-day loses support of the majority of the elected MPs resulting in a change of government," he added.

Meanwhile, Malaysian share prices, down some 30 percent on the year, have taken a pounding on concerns the political stalemate between Abdullah and Anwar might be prolonged.

Analysts said any use of force by Abdullah or his Umno party to thwart the Pakatan takeover would further erode investor confidence in the country.

"The worst thing would be to use the ISA against Anwar. I think Umno is aware it is dangerous to use the ISA. There will be civil unrest, street protests and substantial public backlash.

"The question remains to what degree the government is willing to mobilise police and armed forces to quell the protests," Ramsay said.

## **Place in history**

Abdullah came into office in 2004, inheriting the premiership and the Finance Ministry from Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Seen as a breath of fresh air, he rode a wave of popularity that helped his BN coalition score a record landslide victory at national polls conducted the same year.

His party manifesto, centred on weeding out corruption, together with his consultative and soft style won the hearts of Malaysians, fed up with Mahathir's ham-fisted ways.

But as the global economy weakened in the wake of rocketing fuel prices, Abdullah's grip on the country's economy slipped. His popularity plummeted and a long-overdue move to hike local pump prices in June went down badly with the public, sparking uproar and even street protests.

His failure to nip in the bud several controversies including last week's sudden arrest of blogger and Anwar-ally Raja Petra Kamaruddin, opposition politician Teresa Kok and journalist Tan Hoon Cheng too created enormous backlash that has since forced him into conceding more power to his deputy Najib Abdul Razak.

Earlier this week, Abdullah exchanged his finance portfolio for Najib's defence minister post - a move that party watchers said signalled the start of an agreed power transition to his deputy. Abdullah and Najib had in June made a pact whereby the former would handover to the latter the premiership and presidency of the Umno party in 2010.

Analysts said Abdullah's assumption of the Defence Ministry was a good move for it could help him to maintain fair play and forestall public disorder as the country sailed into uncharted political seas.

"The speculation is defence is best left with Abdullah at this point in time. It serves the purpose of ensuring stability and preparation for the transition of power," said Navaratnam.

"If Anwar's 31 seats are real, then it is the coup de grace. That will be the end of the era of the BN.

"Abdullah will be saluted for letting the democratic process take place and for not stifling the country with arrests and emergency rule.

"It will be his finest hour and he will go down in history as the man who liberalised the democratic system in Malaysia," he added.

However if Abdullah reneged on his word to not invoke the ISA, then "he would only be digging his own grave", Navaratnam said.

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