

# Anwar reinvents himself again

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**D**ATUK Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who started as a firebrand Islamic student activist, reinvented himself as a Malay nationalist after joining Umno in 1982 while continuing to promote and defend Islam.

In 1999 after he was sacked, jailed and desperately fighting to save his political career, he had a difficult and momentous choice to make between forming a Malay-only nationalist party or a multi-racial party as his future political vehicle.

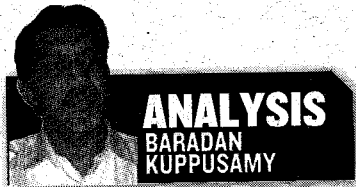
Considering the need to show a united, strong political face – both to Malaysians and his legions of foreign supporters, Anwar chose a multi-racial platform. It was a “politically correct” decision and successfully piled the pressure to free him and return him to the political mainstream.

But in the process Anwar lost the two main planks he had rode to come within a whisker of becoming Prime Minister – as champion of Malay nationalism and promoter and defender of Islam.

Now, as a leader of a multi-racial party, he cannot speak exclusively about Malay nationalism or about Islam but has to present himself as a Malaysian leader and stand on a platform of equality, justice and fairness for all Malaysian races.

He has been walking on this multi-racial platform since his 2004 release but has he succeeded in reinventing himself, for a third time, as a Malaysian leader? The results of this election will show if he has suc-

Anwar Ibrahim changed his image from a Muslim youth leader to a Malay nationalist. Now, he has reinvented himself again by projecting himself as a populist leader who embraces the multi-racial politics. But can Anwar's new attempt win over the voters?



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ceeded or failed.

Anwar is in an unenviable position – he has lost the emotive right as defender of Malay nationalism to Umno by forming a multi-racial party. For the same reason, he cannot claim to be promoter and defender of Islam, a platform that has moved to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi.

By losing the two pillars – Malay nationalism and Islam – Anwar has ceased to be a Malay leader and has become a Malaysian leader in a country where “Malaysians” are still rare and society is populated instead by Malays, Chinese and Indians and something called “others.”

But in the end, politics is about power and winning, and to stay relevant, Anwar's PKR has to win.

Although Anwar himself is barred from contesting for five years because of a corruption conviction,

PKR has to win a reasonable number of seats to keep Anwar relevant and in the political mainstream.

Anwar is under tremendous pressure to ensure his team wins between five and 20 seats but the reality of Malaysian politics makes it difficult for this to happen.

The reason is that as a multi-racial party PKR is in middle-ground politics where the Barisan National is the strongest. These are mixed-constituencies where enough Malays, Chinese and Indians vote for Barisan to give it its perennial two-third majority.

The Barisan will steamroll the PKR in these “mixed” seats and this is why the PKR, under severe pressure to win to stay relevant, is forced into DAP and PAS territory and “curi-

seats that are traditionally fought (and lost or won) by the DAP or PAS.

That is why PKR and DAP had so much difficulty in reaching a seat-sharing agreement in Penang, Perak and Sabah and Sarawak, the so-called frontline states.

The disagreement was all about Chinese-majority seats traditionally contested by the DAP.

For PKR to win, and it has to win for Anwar to survive, it has to grab a few of the Chinese-majority seats from the DAP, which survives by winning a dozen or so Chinese-majority seats known as “safe seats” in the DAP.

Several of these seats have up to 80% Chinese voters, increasingly a rarity in Malaysian politics and, therefore, really too precious to be given away.

A PKR Chinese candidate can win in such seats, perhaps not as easily as the DAP, but still victory is possible by giving PKR a life-line.

The DAP had looked up to Anwar and felt duty-bound to give several marginally “safe” seats to PKR which caused serious infighting in the DAP with some leaders seeing the “giving away” as a permanent loss of the party's “crown jewels”.

This time around, the internal

fighting is much more severe and open than before and the resultant backlash is set to impact the party's performance.

With PAS, Anwar is on a better footing. PAS traditionally saw Anwar as an ally even during Anwar's Umno days and this was made possible by Anwar's close relationship with PAS president, the late Ustad Fadhil Nor, who saw him as his successor in PAS.

PAS has offered several Malay-majority seats to PKR but, like in 2004, PKR victory in these seats appears slim.

This is because Anwar and PKR can no longer fall on the “Malay nationalist champion” or “Islamic defender” mantles to win in Malay-majority seats because as a “Malaysian leader” espousing equality and justice for all, he cannot win the Malay ground which is now shared by Abdullah, Umno and PAS.

Despite the setbacks, PKR is contesting more seats this time than in 2004.

The numbers are big – 66 parliament and 126 state. It is also carrying others under its banner – four Parti Sosialis Malaysia leaders and individuals like lawyer Wee Chee Keong and even “Lingam clip” maker Loh Gwe Burne whose political credentials are unknown.

Many of the PKR candidates are truly “Malaysians” but will likely end up as election statistics, but this does not mean that there is no future for “Bangsa Malaysia” or for multi-racial politics in Malaysia.