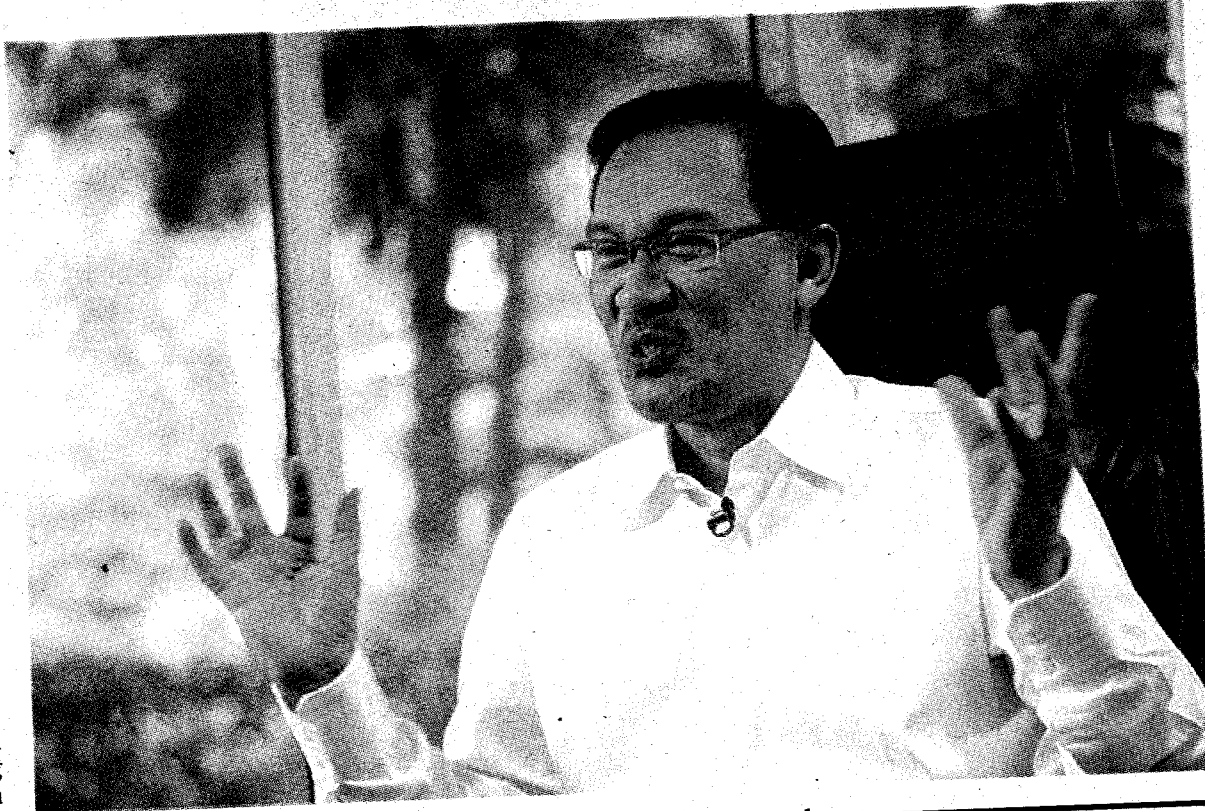


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Priority is to give pact more punch

The Star - 12/4/2008

PKR de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who is cementing the Pakatan Rakyat coalition of PKR, DAP and PAS, sat down recently with The Star for an interview and spoke on a wide range of issues. Here are some of the excerpts.



Q: With only days left before you can return to public office, what are your immediate plans?

A: I am not in a rush. I don't recognise the court's decision; therefore the date has no significance in my mind.

My number one priority is to ensure accountability and good governance in managing the five states.

We have to anticipate the possibility of the Federal Government creating problems in not assisting and not disbursing funds.

So we have to ensure that we manage and fulfil our promises to the electorate. Secondly, we have to cement the coalition to a more credible and formidable group. That is critical.

Q: Your supporters are waiting for you to get back in Parliament yet you say you are no in hurry. A number of opposition MPs have said they are willing to give up their seat for you.

A: Yes, I have an option of about 20 possibilities. I have not made up my mind because this is not a priority. We have 82 MPs right now - more, in fact - and that's enough to make a serious impact on Parliament.

Building up an effective credible Pakatan Rakyat is to my mind far more important for now.

Q: But do you see yourself in Parliament by the end of year?

A: Certainly not in the next few months. In the next few months we will review by looking at it and developments. Things are moving very fast and we are cementing a stronger Pakatan Rakyat and Umno is getting more fragile. I am the first to admit that for negotiations to have a solid relationship take time. But we have time on our side.

Q: There was such euphoria with Pak Lah in 2004 and voters gave him mandate wholesale only to desert Barisan in this 2008 election. What lessons have you learnt from this journey that voters can change their minds just like that?

A: It is my firm belief that you must have the trust and confidence in the wisdom of the masses.

I think the people were right in their decision of supporting Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi in 2004 because initially he made the correct pronouncements and it was very difficult for people to fault him on the pronouncements on an anti-corruption drive, good governance, independent judiciary, economic justice and "I will listen," all those pious platitudes.

One year is too soon, they said, give him a chance but after four years, the people say 'look, you have not delivered'.

So what have I have learnt is that people can give so much affection, they can cry for you, they can give kisses - but never take them for granted.

They may not be holding PhDs in the villages but they are wise in their own way.

Pakatan Rakyat has to hold to this principle very clearly which means our state governments must be clean, not corrupt, work hard and deliver promises.

Yes, there will be mistakes on the way but these can easily be forgiven - but not by absconding funds, stealing and betraying the trust.

People test you on your credibility and the fact that you deliver your promises.

Q: In the event Pakatan Rakyat gets a majority in Parliament, will you be Prime Minister? And is Pakatan Rakyat open to a non-Malay becoming Prime Minister?

A: On the candidate for Prime Minister, we have more or less reached a consensus but it is not final. It has not been announced yet. And I don't want to jump the gun. But this doesn't mean that we are stalling as we are ready to govern. We have time.

If I am entrusted with the job, I do not want to be in a rush because I don't want to govern a fragile government.

I want one that is strong so that the programmes and policies we have promised can be carried out well and there would not be flaws with all sorts of allegations of corruption and abuse of power.

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As for the issue of a non-Malay Prime Minister, based on the constitution and the majority, the tendency is for it to be a bumiputra Malay. My Chinese and Indian colleagues in the opposition too do not question this.

Q: You are the glue that sticks

the Pakatan Rakyat together and it's still a very fragile coalition. In the very unfortunate event you are no longer around, who's going to take over?

A: It's not that we are invincible but because I have been alerted too many times about my personal security by friends here and abroad. But I think the "glue" now transcends me. The people have spoken and PKR, DAP PAS leaders are virtually compelled by the voters to work together. And for now I am just facilitating that. To their credit, the leaders are mature, wise and seem committed to the cause.

Q: What are your views on the Official Secrets Act, Internal Security Act, Printing Presses and Publications Act?

A: All draconian and oppressive laws have to go. There's concern over the threat of terrorism and therefore we have to tighten security laws in terms of dealing with this. We will not compromise on this.

But clearly the detention without trial, the suspension of civil liberties, including the writ of habeas corpus, has to go. Because in defending basic rights, you cannot use draconian laws and condemn people to imprisonment without trial.

Does this mean we compromise on security? No. We will give police adequate powers, in the event they have reasonable need to use them.

So there are a lot of things (that have happened) to suggest that these oppressive laws should be abrogated. Similarly, the Universities and University Colleges Act and the Official Secrets Act need to be reviewed. The OSA should not be used to protect the corrupt.

It makes a mockery of the whole process. If the intention is to safeguard matters concerning national

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security, that's fair. I don't think anybody would say that all government documents should be open (to public scrutiny).

Q: You spent a long time in Umno and the Government, and some say they have not heard Anwar Ibrahim admit to any of the sort of practices that he now rails against. There has been no acknowledgement on your part: "Oh yes, I did some of those things, I am sorry for it, I repent, I'm a changed man now". Some people still doubt that you are now a "transformed man".

A: If I say I'm a transformed man, I'm not being truthful. I have said repeatedly that I was part of the system that even accepted the ISA, the draconian measures, however much I disagreed with them. *Operasi Lalang* - it is a known fact that I went and appealed on behalf of quite a number of the opposition leaders detained.

In the case of the judiciary, Tun Salleh Abbas, for example, at a personal level, too. Some people say that, "If you had been true to your principles, you would have resigned." Okay, I said that I cannot

absolve myself completely from being part of the system. But I think I did not use my power to even (do things such as) censor the media.

Q: What about people who say you had your cronies too back then?

A: They can say that. But you tell me which businessman or big tycoon I did not meet and work with? But can you say I cancelled someone's contract or enriched myself in the process (of carrying out my duties)?

There are still rumours going around that we spent hundreds of million in the elections. But people know how we had to struggle, how much money we gave to each candidate.

You know why we lost in Sabah? We just didn't have the funds (to campaign properly). The candidates appealed to me for more, but I said I'm sorry, that's all we have.

What's important, I think, on the issue of personal integrity is that did you amass wealth, take shares, APs, taxi licences, contracts while you were in government? Did you take one inch of government land? I did not. Do you have one cent in any bank account, even a foreign bank account? I don't. That's why I can go on the attack.

If people ask, your decisions as Finance Minister, was every single decision correct? Of course I can't say that. I can say I'm sorry for the mistakes, but if you have to continue to apologise every week, you will sound like the Japanese apologising (for things they did) during the Second World War.

Q: Some say Khairy Jamaludin reminds them of a younger Anwar - both are ambitious, speak well, have charm, an aura and rose up the ranks real fast, stepping on many toes on their way up. Do you agree that Khairy is a younger you?

A: Frankly I don't know him that well. I met him once soon after I was released when I wanted him to facilitate (getting) my passport because I was in excruciating pain.

Even when he met me, I was in excruciating pain. He sounded reasonably intelligent to me and he was very polite in that meeting.

But I thought that some of his (later) statements appear to be rather arrogant where I was firm and tough. There's a difference between firmness and arrogance and he's an extremely well-to-do businessman.

I don't share this very personal venom and viciousness that is thrown towards him by many others. I follow Umno politics quite closely but I don't share this personal venom against him. It's not a very popular thing to say these days. It may be perceived as my defending him, but I am not defending him.

But I don't share the view that people are attributing the entire blame for the disastrous defeat on him. I think people tend to either over generalise or apportion the blame. I think he's a very convenient scapegoat although he deserves it to a certain extent - but not to be blamed for the entire defeat.

There are many faults and many problems. You can see the many issues that are raised. It's not just him - it is the entire system.