

"And then, of course, they've observed that this government is run by one family," he said, accusing Mr Abdullah of favouring his son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin, a National Front member.

Malaysians were also upset over the rise in crime and seething ethnic and religious tensions. About 60 per cent of the country's 27 million people are Muslim Malays, while a quarter are ethnic Chinese and 8 per cent ethnic Indians.

The performance has even revived talk of Mr Anwar as a future prime minister, after the lost decade that followed his 1998 fall from grace when he was convicted on sex and corruption charges. Mr Anwar, a Malay and former deputy premier, is widely seen as the only politician who could unify the ideologically divided opposition into a coherent and credible political force, though many political experts see this as an almost impossible task.

He weathered blistering personal attacks during the campaign from Mr Abdullah's ruling party, which was clearly rattled as he criss-crossed the nation delivering barnstorming speeches.

A jubilant Mr Anwar said the opposition now had to prove it was a credible alternative to the coalition that has completely dominated Malaysian politics for half a century.

"It is a new dawn for Malaysia," he said. "People want to see justice."

Political observers said Mr Anwar could rule the country if he managed to consolidate the successes of the disparate opposition parties.

"He played a major role in the opposition's success. Anwar remains very influential. He delivered a powerful blow to the ruling party," Mohamad Agus Yusoff from the National University of Malaysia said.

But celebrations were muted as Malaysians remained wary of outbreaks of violence. The last time the coalition suffered a heavy setback, in 1969, race riots erupted.

"I am shocked. It feels Malaysia is a whole new country. It feels like it has been reborn," Daniel Sia, a 27-year-old civil engineer, said.

Source: <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,24897,23347366-601,00.html>