

Top UK paper calls Najib 'authoritarian', predicts Anwar conviction
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 14 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak's image took another major beating today when leading British daily The Guardian predicted Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim would soon become a victim of "egregious, politically suspect injustice" in his sodomy trial.

In a scathing commentary, the UK daily's assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist, Simon Tisdall, even urged Malaysia's western allies in the UK and US to "take a closer look at their friend."

Tisdall argued that the Najib government's handling of Anwar's "highly dubious" sodomy charge warranted closer scrutiny of the country's democratic practices.

Among others, Tisdall sniped at Najib for his "authoritarian tendencies" and "blatant political scaremongering", even accusing the prime minister of lacking in originality for recycling the sodomy charges against Anwar and being accustomed to wielding power due to his family lineage of top political leaders.

"If Anwar is found guilty — and the trial judge seems to have made up his mind already — he will not be the only or even the most important victim of an egregious, politically suspect injustice.

"Malaysia's democratic reputation will have been critically wounded, and for that outrage, Malaysians will have their prime minister, Najib Razak, to thank," Tisdall said.

Convicting Anwar would "critically wound" Malaysia's image, warned the UK writer. The influential writer appeared to agree with opposition claims that Anwar's current sodomy charge — the second in his career — was politically-motivated, saying it was "hardly coincidental" that it had cropped up after Barisan Nasional's (BN) dismal electoral performance in 2008.

He said Najib's key objective now is in winning the general election expected next year and as the "charismatic leader" of the opposition coalition, "Anwar represents the biggest challenge to his (Najib's) continuing ascendancy".

"Najib gives every appearance of preparing for snap polls on the assumption that Anwar will be out of the way and the opposition decapitated," Tisdall said, referring to Najib's rallying battle cry to Umno during the party's just-concluded annual general assembly.

During the meet, said to be Umno's last before the polls, Najib had urged party members to prepare for the "most crucial" election to date as it would be a "tragedy" should Pakatan Rakyat (PR) wrest federal power.

But Najib had nearly faced such a "tragedy", Tisdall said, referring to the international condemnation the prime minister had earned following his government's strong-arm tactics in clamping down on Bersih 2.0's march for free and fair elections.

He said the uncharacteristic public display of discontent during the tumultuous July 9 event

was spurred by factors like spending cuts, alleged corruption and cronyism, claims of a defective electoral system, curbs on public assembly and debate, and press censorship.

In an equally biting article shortly after the rally, Tisdall had then called the government "gormless" for clamping down on the march and warned it against adopting the "Mubarak model" to run the country.

He noted today that after backlash over the rally, Najib is "taking no chances".

"Having more or less reneged on shaky, post-July promises of civil rights reform, Najib is now pushing through remodelled restrictions in the form of the Peaceful Assembly Act," he said.

But Tisdall joined the federal opposition and several civil society groups here in criticising the law that was just passed in the Dewan Rakyat.

"Najib's idea of engaging the 'new generation' of young Malaysians is to ban anyone under the age of 21 from organising a protest," he said.

As such, Tisdall surmised it was unlikely the government would stick to its promise to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last year that Anwar would receive fair judgement, claiming the opposition leader's case is now approaching an "ugly climax".

"The next question is: What will Malaysians and their friends do about it?" he said.

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