

Anwar says verifying Bangladeshi vote allegation

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By Debra Chong

PETALING JAYA, Sept 17 — Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim seemed stunned by news that Bangladeshis have been given voting rights in Malaysia's coming national polls, but is treading carefully in his follow-up.

The head of the three-party Pakatan Rakyat (PR) pact said the news as put up in a statement on the Bangladesh Prime Minister's Office appeared genuine, but declined to state what actions he will take in response to the allegation.

"We're fighting Umno-BN," Anwar (picture) said, referring to the ruling Barisan Nasional and its lynchpin party.

"This is a serious allegation... I am asking friends to help verify if this statement is true or not," the veteran politician on trial for sodomy told a news conference today.

Anwar's cautious reaction was a surprise departure from PKR vice-president Fuziah Salleh's immediate call for a royal commission of inquiry (RCI) into the contentious issue.

PR had recently demanded an emergency sitting of Parliament to debate its claim that thousands of permanent residents have been given citizenship and the right to vote "in the blink of an eye" and the Bangladesh website quoted appears to have backed up its claim.

"We want a royal commission of inquiry to investigate Bangladesh Prime Minister's statement over this matter. If it has actually happened, Najib must be responsible and provide an explanation," Fuziah was quoted as saying in her party's Keadilan Daily website.

The Malaysian Insider had highlighted earlier an online statement from the Bangladesh Prime Minister's Office as saying its citizens working in Malaysia have been asked to vote for the BN government.

According to the NGO Affairs Bureau of the Prime Minister's Office website, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina met her Malaysian counterpart Datuk Seri Najib Razak last year where they discussed "long standing issues, including legalising Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia".

Both met while attending the 66th World Islamic Economic Forum in Kuala Lumpur in May 2010.

It said highly-placed sources claimed that during the meeting, Najib assured Sheikh Hasina of considering the issue of legalising Bangladeshi workers to Malaysia country with utmost sincerity.

"Today, prime minister's office has allegedly received a confirmation from some of our citizens those working in several sectors in Malaysia since last year that they were given more than citizenships from Malaysian Government. In fact they now have been given a right to be a voter in upcoming Malaysian's general election.

"Another highly placed source from prime minister's office has confirmed that Bangladeshi

workers may easily conferred Malaysian citizenship with the condition to vote for party that represents the government in power," the website said.

The website also reported Sheikh Hasina as urging her people" to take this opportunity in order to lower the national poverty in line with government's initiative and numerous measures to solve all major problems, including power and gas crises".

Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said last month that "baseless" allegations of foreigners being given the right to vote will be addressed by the parliamentary select committee (PSC) on electoral reform.

He said that although "the allegations have already been proven in most cases to be untrue," the National Registration Department (NRD) has engaged the Election Commission (EC) to answer PR's claim that at least 1,600 foreigners have been added to the electoral roll.

"These allegations, which I believe are baseless ... this (the PSC) is the best platform for us. We have a co-operation (between the NRD and EC) to clean if there is a need to clean and to answer any claims that need to be answered," he told reporters on August 17.

The bipartisan PSC, which will be formed in the October sitting of Parliament, will likely see PR raise its claim that BN has granted foreigners citizenships in exchange for their support in a general election that must be called by early 2013.

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