

Acquitting Anwar clears way for reforms, says Wall Street Journal
The Malaysian Insider
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By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 10 — The court's acquittal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from a sodomy charge yesterday is good news for Malaysia and its prospects of becoming a more mature, resilient democracy, the Wall Street Journal said today in an editorial.

The respected international newspaper also pointed out that Malaysia had avoided the consequences of a guilty verdict — domestic polarisation and foreign outrage.

Crucially, the newspaper said the verdict would pave the way for the reform of Umno and the country.

Anwar addressing the crowd soon after his acquittal on January 9, 2012. — Picture by Jack Ooi

The editorial pointed out that the court's verdict means Barisan Nasional (BN) would now have to face a charismatic Anwar on the stump in the next elections.

"But that is preferable to facing him as an imprisoned martyr."

Anwar, 64, had been charged with sodomising his former male aide Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan, 26, at a posh condominium in upscale Damansara Heights here four years ago, the second time in his political career. He spent six years in jail before being exonerated in 2004.

Political analysts told The Malaysian Insider yesterday that with the end of the sodomy trial, the two political rivals could now focus their attention on the economy and reforms needed to ensure Malaysia remains competitive.

"The next election will now be fought on policy issues, on alternatives of how the country can be further governed and developed, and on quality instead of sensational issues.

"The positive outcome of the case evens out the playing field," Ibrahim Suffian from the Merdeka Center told The Malaysian Insider yesterday.

Ibrahim and other analysts believe that yesterday's verdict gives Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak a chance to reclaim the middle ground of Malaysian politics, after major inroads were made by Pakatan Rakyat parties in Election 2008.

The Wall Street Journal appeared to agree with the argument in its editorial today.

It said Najib's biggest hurdle to winning votes was the "famous cynicism" among Malaysians that he could carry out his economic and government reform pledges.

"Prime Minister Najib Razak faces the difficult job of reforming Umno before he can reform Malaysia," the paper said, adding that "many Malaysians who would like to support him as the best hope for reforming the country without the risk of race riots are having second

thoughts.”

Najib is also the president of Umno, the lynchpin party in the BN coalition.

The WSJ said voters, especially from among the Chinese and Indian minorities, were now drawn to Islamist opposition party PAS which had shown it has reformed after it “purged” the radical voices from within its ranks and installed leaders who had shown good governance in the states they controlled.

“If it is to stay in power, Umno must now follow suit and rid itself of its old guard, who depend on Malaysia’s system of racial preferences to get rich and grease their patronage networks,” the newspaper said.

It said that Election 2008 had given rise to an urban middle class that no longer votes according to racial lines, which it said meant Umno’s vote bank was no longer the Malay rural vote.

“Younger and better educated voters are turned off by racial chauvinism and political dirty tricks of the type represented by Sodomy II,” the newspaper said.

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