

Sodomy verdict evens out playing field in BN-Pakatan rivalry
The Malaysian Insider
January 09 , 2012
By Debra Chong, Clara Chooi and Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 9 — Malaysia's political middle ground is now up for grabs following Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's acquittal on a sodomy charge that divided voters and was a major distraction for both Barisan Nasional (BN) and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

Political analysts told The Malaysian Insider today 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 (picture) from the Merdeka Center told The Malaysian Insider.

Ibrahim and other analysts believe that today'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 PR parties in Election 2008.

Earlier today, Information Minister Datuk Seri Rais Yatim made the case for the government that today's verdict not only showed the courts were free from manipulation but was also an extension of Najib's reforms push.

Rais had said in a statement issued immediately after the sodomy verdict that "the current wave of bold democratic reforms introduced by Prime Minister Najib Razak will help extend this transparency to all areas of Malaysian life."

Ibrahim appeared to agree with Rais's point, pointing out that "for Najib it allows him to continue speaking as a reformer."

"He (Najib) has not interfered in the court process and the judiciary was independent in this case," he said.

The High Court today acquitted Anwar of a charge of sodomising his former male aide Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan.

Judge Mohd Zabidin Mohd Diah ruled that the prosecution had not done enough to prove Anwar had committed sodomy against Saiful.

"It's a significant moment," Bridget Welsh, a professor at Singapore Management University and a long-term observer of Malaysian politics who was on hand to attend the verdict, was quoted as saying by the Wall Street Journal.

"It shows that Mr Najib is willing to step away from interfering in the judiciary."

Political analyst Khoo Kay Peng said with this morning's verdict, Najib now has the opportunity to burnish his reform credentials.

"There are still issues like corruption... which are bigger themes (than Anwar's sodomy trial)," he told The Malaysian Insider.

Anwar, 64, had been similarly indicted of sodomy over a decade ago and was found guilty. He spent six years in jail before being exonerated.

The High Court's decision this time, ahead of the 13th general election, will likely give a boost to Anwar's PR pact's plans to take over Putrajaya.

Anwar has maintained that his prosecution for sodomy was politically-motivated and a plot to kill his political career.

Today's verdict defied the expectations of political observers and even Anwar, who had alleged that a guilty verdict was predetermined.

But it appears to have provided Anwar and his coalition a fillip, with the former deputy prime minister declaring immediately after the verdict that his main focus now would be to topple the BN government.

Shortly after the ruling, Anwar said on his Twitter feed that "in the coming election, (the) voice of the people will be heard and this corrupt government will be toppled from its pedestals of power."

Ibrahim said that for Anwar, today's verdict vindicates him and could go a long way towards addressing the doubts of voters, particularly those in the Malay-Muslim community.

"For a period of time Anwar was in some sense wounded because he was stuck with this case. With this lifted it might turn things around and help him increase his appeal towards a wider range of Malay-Muslim voters," he said.

Universiti Malaya law lecturer Azmi Sharom said he did not see a clear winner arising from today's verdict.

"BN was in a lose-lose situation anyway, and Pakatan did not have its martyr," he said.

The Malaysian Insider

Copyright © 2012 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/sodomy-verdict-evens-out-playing-field-in-bn-pakatan-rivalry/>