

**Najib always ahead of Anwar in popularity contest, says Soi Lek**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 24 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak has always been the preferred leader for Malaysians, says Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek, rather than Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who has lost support after “crying wolf” too many times.

The MCA president also believed that Anwar’s sodomy acquittal had vindicated the prime minister and not the opposition leader, as it proved the judiciary’s independence — a line that the Najib administration has used after the verdict was handed down on January 9.

As such, Dr Chua (picture) disagreed that the acquittal had placed both rivals on a level playing field and was unlikely to have a great impact on the results of the coming general election.

“To begin with, it has never been a level playing field and all the studies have shown that Najib, on his own, is more popular than Anwar.

“Their (the opposition’s) own studies also show that. So it never started with the same level playing field,” the MCA chief told The Malaysian Insider in an exclusive interview here.

Following Anwar’s highly-publicised sodomy acquittal, analysts said both political rivals Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR) were now neck and neck in the contest for Malaysia’s middle ground.

They added that with the end of the sodomy trial, both sides could now focus their attention on the economy and reforms needed to ensure Malaysia remains competitive.

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

But Dr Chua said Anwar’s initial popularity when he re-entered the political scene had lost steam over the years.

“I think he has been calling bluff too many times. First, they said they would take over. I still remember receiving the SMS that the Agong was going to swear in Anwar as the new PM.

“So when you cry wolf or fire too many times, there will be a day when you actually catch fire and nobody pays attention to it,” he said.

Dr Chua was referring to Anwar’s controversial September 16 takeover attempt, when the PR de facto leader had boasted mass defections from BN would help the fledgling opposition pact claim Putrajaya.

The failed attempt haunted Anwar for years, with BN leaders trumpeting to the public that the incident showed the opposition leader’s penchant for lying to the public.

"Next, people can also see that what we call the 'PM-elect' (Anwar), apart from his rhetoric, what has he done?"

"As RPK (blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin) correctly pointed out — in three years, he (Anwar) has gone overseas 60 or 100 times. Can you imagine? Hopping around the world, giving lectures... people can see whether you are just spinning, playing politics," Dr Chua said.

In contrast, the former health minister said Najib has been concentrating on running his administration and transforming the economy.

"Whether you like Najib or not, he has paid a lot of attention to the economic transformation of the country and all the indicators show that in terms of foreign direct investment, we have done up," he said.

Dr Chua said the business community are "practical people" who believe in delivery more than political rhetoric and in that respect, Najib has far surpassed Anwar in the popularity contest.

Buoyed by the feel-good factor following Anwar's acquittal and cash handouts from Budget 2012, it is widely expected that Najib will call elections within months, ahead of the BN mandate expiring in May 2013.

Najib is due to celebrate the Chinese New Year later today in Penang, where the sizeable Chinese community voted in PR in Election 2008, paving the way for Lim Guan Eng to be chief minister.

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