

Anwar: Malaysia will keep to democracy, not caliphate
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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 18 — Malaysia is unlikely to follow a caliphate system of government any time soon but will stay a democracy that recognises the rights of non-Muslims, Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said last night in a bid to sooth a fevered public as debate continues to rage over the set up of a Islamic state in the run-up to key elections.

The controversy erupted after an Umno politician in Johor mooted for hudud, the Islamic penal code, to be implemented nationwide and to cover both Muslims and non-Muslims; prompting several religious conservatives of the faith to question PAS's commitment to an Islamic state and driving a wedge between the opposition Islamist party and its secular ally, the DAP.

"There are those who say because the Muslim ummah is... a single entity, therefore there should be one ruler," Anwar, who leads the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition pact, said in his Google Hangout session called "Borak Bersama Anwar (Chat with Anwar)" late last night.

But the PKR de facto head said current realities did not allow Malaysia to follow a caliphate system where the government is based on Islamic religious law or syariah.

"If we look at Malaysia, while the Muslims are the majority (and) Islam is the religion of the federation, the existence and rights of non-Muslims must be taken into account and recognised," he said in reply to a question over Google+ from Internet user Mohamad Fairul Hamikey on Google+ who wanted to know if a caliphate system could be used here.

While Islam is stated to be the religion of the federation, religious power is decentralised. Each of the nine Malay state Rulers is also the head of religion in their respective states while the Yang di-Pertuan Agong acts for four other states, Penang, Malacca, Sabah and Sarawak, and in the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan.

Questions on whether PR would implement hudud law should it take power at the next polls, due in April next year, were also posted on both the search engine's Google+ webpage and social network Facebook for the event but were not picked up.

Anwar said the questions involved polemics and discourse that were very wide.

He added that because of this Islamic scholars in general had decided that the best way forward was to let the people elect their leaders to ensure a clean democracy.

"If this is allowed, then people can elect a legitimate government representing the needs of many," he said, adding that upholding democracy was crucial to fulfil the people's goals as seen in the Arab Spring that swept through the Middle East and North African nations last year.

"Because with this realisation, they are free to choose leaders which they believe can bring the aspirations of everyone," he added.

Anwar's live Google Hangout event is seen as a chance for the federal opposition leader to showcase his ability to answer "uncomfortable" questions from the public.

The 65-year-old is "the first Malaysian and Southeast Asian politician to be featured on a Google Hangout on Air event," PKR's communications director Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad told reporters.

Praba Ganesan, the party's social media strategist, said that other Southeast Asian leaders have not had similar online forums yet "because it's direct engagement and it puts leaders in the hot seat".

While Anwar has seized on the Internet to deliver his message after being shut out of the mainstream media, his online presence is still less than his rival, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's.

A check with the social media monitoring site socialbakers.com on August 8 showed Najib has 1,135,529 "likes" on Facebook and 801,833 followers on Twitter against Anwar's 379,612 "likes" on Facebook and 179,830 following him on Twitter.

But his followers hope the Google Hangout will expand his appeal to Internet-savvy young voters, who are said to make up three million of the country's 12 million-strong electorate.

The PR opposition pact has always been seen as having the upper hand in cyberspace presence over Barisan Nasional, but in recent months the ruling coalition has expanded its online presence with several pro-BN news portals and a rising number of supporters taking to Twitter.

US President Barack Obama and Australia's Prime Minister Julia Gillard have also used Google Hangout to engage their citizens, with the former using it as part of his re-election campaign.

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