

Anwar 'Guilty' Again in Malaysia
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The guilty verdict against Anwar Ibrahim in a Malaysian court Friday was met with derision even by government supporters, who worry it could boost the opposition leader's political standing and damage the ruling Barisan Nasional. Anwar was sentenced to five years in prison and granted bail awaiting further appeal.

The long-running case, which was on appeal by prosecutors, has been condemned by international human rights groups and governments as politically motivated, tainted by shoddy evidence, prosecutorial mistakes and a long list of procedural errors.

Ahead of the decision, rights group Human Rights Watch called the government appeal a "travesty of justice." Angry opposition supporters outside the courthouse chanted against the verdict.

Upon hearing the news, one well-placed government supporter said the verdict was "idiotic" and would hurt the ruling Barisan National coalition by fueling public sympathy for Anwar.

"They are handing the country over to Anwar," said the man, who declined to be named. He said he feared that internal United Malays National Organization (UMNO) politics and the hatred some politicians have for Anwar fueled a faulty decision.

UMNO is the country's largest political party and leader of the ruling coalition.

Anwar was acquitted of sodomy charges on Jan. 9, 2012 when a judge ruled that DNA evidence showing he had sex with a former aide was irrevocably tainted by inept or unlawful police handling. The prosecution appealed the case a week later.

The opposition leader will not be jailed immediately and he is expected to appeal the decision to the Federal Court, the country's highest tribunal, which will take months, if not years, to reach a decision. The verdict does, however, appear to block Anwar's bid to run in a by-election that would have likely led to him becoming chief minister of Selangor state.

According to a Barisan Nasional source, the appeal was pushed by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his longtime associate, Daim Zainuddin to block the possibility that Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak would cut a peace deal that could bring Anwar into a "unity" government.

Mahathir, Anwar's one-time mentor and ally, was considered to be behind an equally shoddy case brought against Anwar for sodomy in 1998. Anwar was jailed on those charges, which were eventually overturned in 2004. He returned to political life to lead the opposition, which narrowly lost to the governing coalition in the last two general elections. In May 2013, the opposition coalition won the popular vote but did not win enough seats in parliament to overturn the ruling coalition.

The decision is expected to give Anwar a massive political boost and again turn him into a martyr.

His followers seemed stunned and were gathering at the courthouse afterward, chanting "Reformasi!" and "Free Anwar!!" Anwar himself was outraged and shouted at the judges after the verdict was read.

"It is all so sudden," said pro-Anwar lawmaker Lee Khai Loon, according to Malaysiakini.com. "We didn't ask people to come because normally decisions would take some time."

The police tripled their numbers at the back entrance to the courthouse after the verdict, some forming a human shield in front of the staircase into the Palace of Justice.

Suara Rakyat Malaysia, an NGO generally considered to be aligned with the opposition, charged that the appeal had been expedited by the government to block Anwar from registering in the April 23 Selangor by-election.

The verdict further complicates an already cloudy political scene in Malaysia. Najib is under pressure from hardliners associated with Mahathir inside UMNO, who are angry over the government's poor showing in the May elections.

Behind the scenes, meanwhile, Anwar reportedly has met in London and elsewhere with Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, a one-time ally who broke with Anwar to return to UMNO. He is now Home Affairs Minister and a close ally of Najib's. The talks are aimed at making a deal with Najib, who is under assault from inside UMNO, principally by Mahathir.

Anwar's bid to take the leadership of Selangor, Malaysia's most prosperous and populous state, has been viewed with distress within the Barisan Nasional and particularly within UMNO because of a fear it would give him important political traction and a public forum during key government meetings chaired by the prime minister.

In addition, he would gain control over lucrative government contracts to be awarded to political allies. He is also expected to show stiffer resistance to Malay superiority groups on religious issues against ethnic Indians and Chinese.

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