

No gains for Barisan even without Anwar, Nik Aziz, say observers
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By Eileen Ng

Barisan Nasional (BN) is mistaken if it thinks the jailing of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the death of Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat will make the coalition stronger, analysts say.

They said those celebrating the opposition leader's conviction were already hardcore BN supporters to begin with, and public sympathy over his perceived political persecution could turn the tide against the ruling coalition among fence sitters.

They also said that Nik Aziz, although highly respected, had been out of active politics for some time due to his deteriorating health, and his influence had waned in recent years.

Yet, they cautioned that while public support and sympathy may be with Pakatan Rakyat (PR), the alliance of PKR, DAP and PAS must work hard to resolve differences over issues like hudud and local government elections.

Despite a more muted public reaction towards Anwar's five-year jail sentence on February 10, compared to his arrest in 1998 when thousands took to the streets, the public is still on his side, said Dr Lim Teck Ghee.

"It is difficult to see how BN can gain any advantage as (jailing Anwar) does not provide a game-changing gain for any BN party or the coalition as a whole.

"As with all prominent political prisoners in recent history throughout the world, the responsible regime will be tainted and will pay a heavy political price for it," he told The Malaysian Insider.

Lim (pic, left), who is director of The Centre for Policy Initiative, said Anwar, who is the Permatang Pauh MP, could use the weapon of public sympathy and speak out from behind bars.

"Jailing is not going to silence him, unless he is kept in solitary confinement and is made incommunicado," he said.

Lim said Nik Aziz, on the other hand, had been ill and the impact of his death was negligible.

"His influence on PAS and PR came primarily from his principled moral standing and his relationship with Anwar but the latter factor has been declining for some time."

Nik Aziz, who was the Kelantan menteri besar, was renowned for his staunch opposition to any attempt to cooperate with Umno and BN.

Lim believed that Nik Aziz's supporters would continue to take the same position.

Ibrahim Suffian (pic, right), who heads independent pollster Merdeka Center, also does not see much change in public support for the BN as a result of Anwar's imprisonment.

At best, the support level will remain the same, he said.

In the 13th general election in May 2013, BN won 133 out of 222 parliamentary seats, seven less seats compared to the 2008 polls.

BN also lost the popular vote, securing only 47% compared to the PR's 51%.

"Anwar's conviction is expected to be positive among hardcore BN supporters but these people are going to vote for BN anyway.

"Bottom line, no major gain expected for the government from Anwar's conviction," said Ibrahim.

He said Anwar's conviction was likely to elicit sympathy from voters who are not too pro-BN or pro-PR, but perceive the trial to be politicised.

Political scientist, Dr Wong Chin Huat (pic, left) said the anger and grief over Anwar's jailing and Nik Aziz's passing may have a positive effect on PR in the short term, but added that its long-term survival hinges on its policy positions, not personalities.

"Due to his ailing health, Nik Aziz had not been able to play much of a positive role in strengthening Pakatan. And even if Anwar had been freed on February 10, Pakatan may still break if PAS insists on pushing for hudud in Kelantan," said the academic with the Penang Institute.

What will make or break PR, said Wong, is its ability to offer an inclusive vision for Malaysia, one that can steer the country away from the BN's race-based politics.

PR will have to address the insecurity felt by BN's Malay and conservative supporters over the perception that a PR-led government may benefit non-Muslims more.

At the same time, PR must also address the frustration among non-Malays over persistent racialising and extremist views by pro-Umno and right wing groups.

"On one hand, the worst nightmare for PR is that it fails to crush the 'Malays-under-threat' psychological warfare to hold and grow its conservative Malay-Muslim base, and on the other hand, to persuade its disappointed supporters from amongst the Malays and liberals to be bothered about the next general election.

"If these challenges are not resolved, PR may still break even if Anwar and Nik Aziz are on the stage. Their exit merely exposes the ideological bottle-neck Pakatan is in now that it has lost two of its most charismatic leaders within a week," Wong added.

Wan Saiful Wan Jan (pic, right) of think tank Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas) agrees, and said the problems between PAS and its PR allies were beyond Nik Aziz's ability.

The Islamist party had clashed with its allies over the Selangor MB imbroglio last year, and recently over DAP's plan to push for local government elections. It is also at loggerheads over the proposed implementation of hudud or the Islamic penal code in Kelantan.

"The problems in PAS have to be solved by the current leadership, whether Nik Aziz is still here or not," Wan Saiful said.

But analyst Dr James Chin (pic, left) said Anwar's incarceration and Nik Aziz's death could pose a setback for PR, as Anwar is a moderating influence between DAP and PAS, while Nik Aziz was a pillar for PAS's commitment in PR.

"With Anwar and Nik Aziz gone, PAS may push harder. There will be more opposition in PAS towards PR, and DAP in particular," he warned.

He said this would result in BN making some gains and in the short term, the ruling pact will be stronger, especially for prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Chin said Umno wanted a strong leader and Najib, as the Umno president, had shown that he was "strong" where Anwar is concerned.

In the long run, however, Chin predicted that BN would be weakened as the younger generation, who form a key voting block in the next general election, think the trial was a "political show".

The next general election must be called by 2018.

"It does not matter if Anwar is truly guilty or not, they think Anwar should not be prosecuted in the first place," said Chin, who heads University of Tasmania Asia Institute. – February 14, 2015.

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