

Putrajaya an 'ostrich' for ignoring world opinion on Anwar verdict, say lawyers
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Malaysia cannot afford to disregard world opinion about the conviction and subsequent imprisonment of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim for sodomy, lawyers said today, noting that the country's reputation had taken a heavy beating following the verdict.

Latheefa Koya and N. Surendran (pic, right) reminded Putrajaya today that the world was watching how Anwar would be treated in prison, even as the home minister insists that the opposition leader will not be treated any differently from other convicts in prison.

"The world is watching the treatment of Anwar and our country's international reputation is taking a heavy beating. Malaysia is a trading nation; we cannot afford to ignore world opinion," they said in a joint statement today.

"Anwar must be treated as a 'prisoner of conscience', and not as if he were an ordinary convict."

The Federal Court on Tuesday rejected Anwar's final appeal against his conviction and five-year jail sentence for sodomising his former aide, Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan, on June 26, 2008.

Following that, Home Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said that Anwar would not be given any special treatment in Sungai Buloh Prison while serving his sentence, adding that all prisoners were treated equally as provided by law and prison regulations.

This was echoed by his deputy, Datuk Seri Dr Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar, who said it would not be fair to other inmates if the Prisons Department gave any special treatment to Anwar.

"We cannot give five-star treatment to former VIPs or millionaires who are sentenced to jail after being found guilty, while beggars are in a terrible condition," he said.

Latheefa and Surendran noted however that both Zahid and Wan Junaidi had "deliberately" implied that Anwar was no different from any other person found guilty of a crime by the courts.

"This completely ignores the fact that the conviction and jailing of the opposition leader has been heavily criticised both within the country and internationally.

"Major powers such as the United States, United Kingdom, the European Union, Australia and Canada have been quick to disapprove of Anwar's conviction and imprisonment," the duo said.

Anwar's conviction has also been criticised by international media, who said that the five-year jail sentence on Anwar was a setback for Malaysia and could result in a loss of support for the ruling BN government.

The Wall Street Journal called the verdict a "Pyrrhic victory" for Umno, adding that although BN had succeeded in stopping Anwar's political career, it had damaged the country's reputation "as well as the fabric of society, and perhaps sealed its own fate at the next election".

It said Umno's "decades-long vendetta" against Anwar "brought discredit on Malaysia's government and political culture", adding that the two sodomy charges against the opposition leader had come at crucial junctures of his career.

The Economist, meanwhile, said BN now risked "becoming a mere shell for an Umno ever more beholden to Malay-nationalist forces", and warned of "a dangerous racial polarisation in Malaysian politics".

Commenting on racial tensions in the country, the London-based paper said although Anwar was "a political chameleon whose real beliefs are sometimes hard to pin down", he had succeeded in leading PR as an alliance that bridged Malaysia's ethnic divides.

Latheefa and Surendran said Putrajaya should know that no one was convinced by their "ostrich-like pretence" that the case was just like any other criminal case as Anwar has continued to enjoy tremendous support and sympathy from Malaysians despite his conviction.

"Even the Burmese military regime placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, and did not send her to an ordinary jail. At the very least, Anwar Ibrahim deserves the same treatment.

"To most Malaysians the jailing of Anwar Ibrahim is a wrongful and repugnant act. BN ignores this at its own peril," they said. – February 14, 2015.

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