

**Pakatan on knife-edge now Anwar in jail**  
**The Malaysian Insider**  
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The jailing of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim dashes the dreams of millions of Malaysians yearning to oust the country's authoritarian regime, unless his shell-shocked opposition movement can bridge deep differences without his unifying presence, analysts said.

The opposition, now without a leader, must continue its fight against a government that, despite a worsening reputation at home and abroad, is digging in its heels and looks unlikely to face any serious international repercussions for throwing the opposition leader behind bars.

Since it was formed seven years ago, the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) alliance has had little in common other than a desire to defeat Umno, which has ruled with a tight grip since independence in 1957.

PR's ability to seize unprecedented swathes of parliament in recent elections allowed it to push aside questions over its cohesiveness, but no longer, said Ibrahim Suffian, Malaysia's leading political pollster.

"Anwar's jailing forces them to deal with those problems now. The question is whether they can," he said.

PR members are at each other's throats over policy and leadership differences.

The main source of discord is PAS, which is calling for harsh shariah law in a state it governs and pressing for more influence in the largely progressive opposition.

Shariah is strongly opposed by PAS's partners – DAP dominated by ethnic Chinese, and Anwar's centrist PKR.

The internal differences nearly caused PR's collapse last year in a bitter dispute over Selangor, and have prevented formulation of a post-Anwar succession plan.

All eyes are now on whether PAS progressives can wrest control from a conservative leadership in June party polls. Suffian gives them a 50-50 chance.

"It's all up to PAS. If the moderates can't take over, Pakatan will probably break up," he said.

That would be a crushing disappointment to millions of voters.

While living standards have soared under Umno over the decades, disgust runs high over corruption, crony capitalism, rights abuses, and the destruction of once-rich rainforests by government-linked logging and agricultural interests.

Laying bare the national mood, PR won 52% of votes cast in 2013 elections, though Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak clung to power thanks to a skewed parliamentary system.

Anwar, 67, was jailed for five years, and faces a further five-year politics ban after his release, over a sodomy conviction he calls a government conspiracy.

Speculation has risen that outrage of the affair could finally vault PR to power.

But with their undisputed standard-bearer now eliminated, the coalition must survive a leadership battle expected to be bruising, said Bridget Welsh, a Malaysia politics analyst.

"Who leads Pakatan is a question that will be very difficult to resolve, and has already fueled a lot of division even before the Anwar decision," she said.

Speculation has centred on Anwar's longtime protege Mohamed Azmin Ali, considered among the only possible consensus candidates.

But he lacks Anwar's charisma on the stump and it remains to be seen whether he will appeal to other PR members.

"I don't deny we have some problems at the top leadership, but I think now is the right time for Pakatan to move forward based on a common framework that we have agreed before," Azmin said yesterday.

"We have to make sure Pakatan remains intact and a formidable force in the coming general elections (due by 2018)."

But unseating Umno remains a formidable task.

Najib's reputation has plummeted due to issues including his government's treatment of Anwar and for allowing an explosion of dangerous politically motivated racial and religious rhetoric by Umno-allied forces.

A scathing New York Times report this week detailed the profligate jet-setting lifestyle of Najib's retinue, and the murky dealings of a sovereign fund launched and chaired by the prime minister in which hundreds of millions of dollars appear unaccounted for.

The United States led international criticism of the Anwar ruling Tuesday.

But Washington – which seeks bolstered alliances in Southeast Asia amid China's rise – indicated it would go no further, touting its "strong partnership" with Malaysia.

Najib, meanwhile, is secure within Umno, and his government is expected to continue digging in as it loses votes.

It launched a crackdown after the 2013 elections that has seen dozens of people, mainly opposition figures, hit with various questionable charges, and critics say they expect an upcoming parliamentary redelineation exercise to serve Umno's interests, further bullet-proofing its hold on parliament.

"At the end of the day, they don't give a damn what the rest of the world has to say as long as they keep getting their money and hold on to power," said John Malott, a former US ambassador to Malaysia.

"They will be tough to push out even if PR resolves all of its troubles." – AFP, February 11, 2015.

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