

Anwar shows Mahathir is right, he's optimistic

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KUALA LUMPUR: With a little more than a day remaining before Malaysians head to the polls, Pakatan Harapan (PH) chairman Anwar Ibrahim says, albeit with measured confidence, that his coalition is close to regaining power.

Speaking with Nikkei Asia late Thursday, Anwar shared his vision that a government can hold the country's complicated multi-ethnic society together by embracing that diversity while also building international stature as an "influential middle power," one that threads a foreign policy through the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China.

But conquering these challenges will be "no easy feat," admitted the 75-year-old. Foes in the ruling alliance, led by Umno and former prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin, accuse Anwar of colluding with the ethnic Chinese-controlled DAP at the expense of the Malays who account for nearly 70% of the country's population.

Anwar had just flown back to the capital after having crisscrossed 800km to campaign in three states earlier in the day.

"The support has been very good," he says between bites of a banana and sips of water, while being driven to his next rally. He confesses to skipping proper dinners in favour of curry puffs.

The election, which takes place on Saturday, is hotly contested, with an average of 4.3 candidates vying for each of the 222 seats. But Anwar likes what he sees.

"Frankly, most people said it was better than the enthusiasm we saw in 2018," Anwar says of his PH rallies. "But we'll see."

PH won the landmark election (GE14) four years ago that ended Barisan Nasional's six decades of dominance. But its victory was cut short in February 2020 due to an internal coup in which ruling lawmakers switched allegiance to form a government with the Umno-led opposition.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who at the age of 93 led the 2018 government, had verbally promised to hand power to Anwar in two years, but that day never came. The men's rivalry dates back to the 1990s, when Anwar was serving as Mahathir's deputy prime minister. The two had a falling out, and Anwar was thrown in jail on corruption charges.

Pollsters in recent days have begun to note that PH, an underdog before the dissolution of Parliament last month, is resurgent – a piece of positive news that turns Anwar introspective.

“I'm an idealist in a sense,” he says, “but I also understand the standard realities of politics. You know you're against a huge system and it is not going to be an easy feat.”

The “huge system” refers to a concentration of power under Umno that critics say began during Mahathir's first term in office from 1981 to 2003, then erupted into headlines decades later in the form of the 1MDB corruption scandal, which has put the disgraced former prime minister Najib Razak behind bars.

It is also a system that has taken a toll on the country's economy. Unravelling it, Anwar says, will be PH's job.

His coalition, if it regains power, will also have to navigate through stormy international conditions. In this realm, it would attempt to position Malaysia as that “influential middle power,” one that succumbs to the geopolitical pull of neither the US nor China.

“Our focus should be to enhance the economy and to move into new areas (such as) digitalisation, artificial intelligence, the services industry,” Anwar said. “(We) have to maintain very good relations, I mean, for practical reasons, as China is an important neighbour, both in terms of geopolitical and economic power.

“But there’s no reason why we should reduce our bilateral arrangement and relations with America, (or more broadly with) the West.”

Whether Anwar and PH have a chance to carry out their ideas depends on voters, and pundits expect no clear winner when polling stations close on Saturday.

“No party would win with an absolute majority,” Mahathir told Nikkei on Thursday, citing the multiple candidates vying for each seat. The 97-year-old former leader predicted more political turmoil lies ahead and scoffed at Anwar’s chances of winning. “Everybody knows Anwar is very optimistic,” he said.

If Mahathir is right, Anwar’s optimism is showing him that the country’s grassroots are ready to accept his party and put corruption and poor governance in the past.

“Now when it comes to the real battle,” Anwar says as he races for votes and jockeys against his political foes, “I am in my element.”

His alliance, he says, is close to clinching a simple majority of 112 seats.

“What happens in the event that we do not?” he asks rhetorically. “Then, of course, we’ll cross the bridge (when we get there).”

He does not rule out the possibility of working with other parties.

Anwar’s car is now approaching the site of the final rally of the day. Campaign songs can be heard blaring out of speakers in the distance.

The man who has never realised his dream of being prime minister despite closing in on the job three times in the past jumps out of the car and quickly fades into the cheering crowd. He takes the podium and hammers out the campaign's familiar themes.

“If you want me to lead this country,” he bellows, “I will defend the Malays and their rights. I will also defend the rights of the Chinese and Indians. This is a new Malaysia.”

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