

Acquittal of Opposition Leader May Level Field in Malaysia

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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — The surprise acquittal of Anwar Ibrahim, the Malaysian opposition leader, of sodomy charges is likely to make the country's next national elections a tightly contested affair, analysts said Monday after the verdict was announced.

The verdict ended a politically charged trial in which Mr. Anwar, 64, faced as many as 20 years in prison. A conviction could have effectively ended his political career as well as possibly the opposition's best chance at toppling the governing coalition.

There had been widespread speculation that Mr. Anwar would be found guilty of sodomizing a former political aide, Saiful Bukhari Azlan, a charge Mr. Anwar said was politically motivated. Instead, the ruling paves the way for Mr. Anwar to compete in elections — which must be held by mid-2013, although many in Malaysia say they could be held within months — and to capitalize on the gains his coalition made during the 2008 vote.

But in a two-minute speech that delivered a swift end to a nearly two-year trial, Justice Mohamad Zabidin Diah told a packed courtroom that DNA evidence presented by prosecutors could not be relied upon for a conviction. He said that in sex-offense cases, the court was reluctant to impose a conviction without corroborative evidence.

"This court at this stage could not with 100 percent certainty exclude the possibility that the sample is not compromised," Justice Zabidin said. "Therefore it is not safe to rely on the sample."

When he announced the acquittal, the courtroom erupted in cheers as Mr. Anwar hugged his family members, many of whom began to cry.

"Thank God justice has prevailed," Mr. Anwar said. "I've been vindicated."

The government said the decision proved that the judiciary was independent.

Sodomy, even between consenting adults, is still a crime in Muslim-majority Malaysia. A prison sentence of a year or more would have barred Mr. Anwar, a former deputy prime minister, from public office for five years after his release.

The charges against Mr. Anwar came several months after the opposition made historic gains in the 2008 elections, depriving the governing party of the two-thirds majority in Parliament for the first time since independence in 1957. He has said the administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak had a role in orchestrating the charges in a bid to damage his image. The government has denied the accusation.

There had been speculation that the opposition could suffer a leadership crisis if Mr. Anwar were jailed, as many thought he would be.

Ibrahim Suffian, director of the Merdeka Center, an independent polling company, said that the conclusion of Mr. Anwar's trial meant that the next election would be based on policy ideas relating to governing and the country's development.

Mr. Ibrahim said that the verdict would vindicate Mr. Anwar's claim of a "political frame-up," but the acquittal could also benefit the government. "It allows the prime minister to burnish his credentials as a reformer and is in keeping with his New Year's message that he wants Malaysia to be a more democratic country," Mr. Ibrahim said.

Mr. Najib has introduced a series of changes in recent months, but rights groups and the opposition have criticized him for not going far enough.

"I think both sides will benefit out of this, but it benefits Anwar a bit more," Mr. Ibrahim said. "Anwar has been under this case for nearly three years. This has in some sense created a problem for him in terms of his domestic image with the Malay Muslim electorate, and today's judgment allows him to be free from that."

Ooi Kee Beng, deputy director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, said the verdict would provide a "morale boost" for Mr. Anwar, who had been in political limbo for the duration of the trial.

But Ong Kian Ming, a political analyst and lecturer at UCSI University in Kuala Lumpur, said the acquittal would deny the opposition the extra support a guilty verdict would have delivered. "The sympathy factor that would have given a 1- to 2-percent swing in favor of the opposition will not be present now," he said.

In a statement, the information, communications and culture minister, Rais Yatim, said, "Malaysia has an independent judiciary, and this verdict proves that the government does not hold sway over judges' decisions."

This is the second time Mr. Anwar has fought sodomy charges. He was found guilty of sodomy and abuse of power more than a decade ago on charges that were also criticized by his supporters as politically motivated. He served six years in jail before the sodomy conviction was overturned in 2004.

After Monday's verdict, three explosions were heard near the court, where thousands of supporters were celebrating. The police said five people suffered minor injuries.

Outside the court, Mr. Anwar told supporters the case was not about the freedom of one man.

"Our duty now is to free the rakyat," he said, according to Malaysiakini, a news Web site, using the Malay word for people. "We want real democracy, free media and a just economy. Let us all unite and now save Malaysia."

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