

Anwar's wife to challenge Malaysian prime minister at next elections

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The wife of former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim announced last week that she will challenge Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in the next general elections, due to be held before April 2000. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who established the Social Justice Movement (Adil) last December, intends to stand in Mahathir's own constituency of Kubang Pasu in northern Malaysia near the border with Thailand.

Dr Azizah, a 45-year-old eye specialist, addressed a rally on February 25 of at least 20,000 people in Jitra in Kubang Pasu electorate, which is in the rural heartland of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). She told the late night rally: "If the people of Kubang Pasu want me to, I cannot refuse." Mahathir has held the seat for 25 years.

Azizah also has the backing of the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), an opposition Islamic party, which has been gaining support following the political crisis precipitated by the arrest of Anwar last year. PAS holds power in the northern state of Kelantan--the only government not controlled by UMNO and the ruling coalition. PAS president Fadzil Mohamad Noor told the rally that Azizah could "stand on any ticket she wants" and PAS would not run against her in that constituency.

Comments to the media by those at the rally reflected growing alienation from the Mahathir government. One woman said: "This is Mahathir's territory. We no longer support him because of his actions. I think many people also have similar feelings. They realise what he has done is wrong." A man in his 30s commented: "The crowd here is asking for justice. It's not just a show of sympathy for Azizah."

The rally was followed last weekend by a demonstration of 5,000 in the northern suburbs of the capital Kuala Lumpur. It had been called only hours

after the admission by former police chief Abdul Rahim Noor that he had physically assaulted Anwar in prison last September when Anwar was first arrested. Opposition leaders denounced Rahim while the crowd chanted "Mahathir resign now!" Mahathir was not only prime minister but also the home minister, and therefore in charge of the police, at the time of Anwar's detention.

Anwar, who was originally detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA), is currently standing trial on four charges of corruption, and faces a further five charges of sexual misconduct and another of corruption in the future. He has repeatedly maintained that the charges are bogus and that he has been the victim of a top-level political conspiracy involving Mahathir and his close political associates.

Anwar and his wife have become the focus for a loose coalition of opposition parties and groups. On February 21, about 2,000 opposition politicians, academics and rights activists took part in a conference entitled "Justice for All" in Kuala Lumpur. The conference, which included representatives from PAS and also the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), called on voters to end Mahathir's rule at the next general elections.

Two broad umbrella groups were established last year: Gagasan, based on a number of non-government organisations (NGOs) as well as PAS and DAP, and Gerak, consisting predominantly of Muslim parties and groups. The Islamic youth organisation ABIM, which Anwar once led, is a member of both groupings.

Whatever the current displays of unity, deep divisions in the opposition exist just below the surface. Malaysian politics as a whole has been based on exploiting racial and religious differences between the majority Malays and the smaller ethnic Chinese and

Indian communities. The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition comprises UMNO, the conservative Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) as well as smaller regional and racially-based parties.

Throughout the last 40 years, UMNO has dictated the terms of the coalition to its partners. Sharp tensions have often arisen when UMNO leaders have resorted to Malay nationalism in order to shore up their support among their electoral base. In 1971, the government set out to bolster the economic position of Malays at the expense of other ethnic groups through the New Economic Policy. The NEP provided economic benefits and privileges for a small layer of Malay businessmen while imposing quotas on the number of non-Malays in tertiary education and government jobs.

Neither PAS nor DAP have opposed the racial divisions in Malaysian politics. Both are bourgeois parties that criticise the ruling parties for not doing enough to defend the interests of their respective ethnic groups. PAS has attacked UMNO for failing to protect the special claims of Malays as the original "owners of the land" while DAP is critical of the MCA for not defending Chinese language, education and culture.

PAS, which was originally formed in 1951 as UMNO's religious wing, has more and more stridently demanded the Islamisation of Malaysian society and the establishment of an Islamic state. After winning control of the Kelantan state government in 1990, PAS introduced Islamic law into the penal code, including *hudud* penalties such as amputating the hands of thieves and executing convicted adulterers.

DAP had its origins in Singapore's People's Action Party during the brief period between 1963 and 1965 in which Singapore was part of Malaysia. In the name of defending democratic rights and opposing corruption, DAP speaks for sections of business--particularly Chinese--that have lost out as a result of the close ties between UMNO, the state apparatus and Malay entrepreneurs.

The groupings involving DAP and PAS are uneasy temporary alliances of convenience. DAP leaders have already ruled out the establishment of a formal electoral coalition involving PAS. "We can only begin to talk about an electoral arrangement and alliance involving both DAP and PAS if we agree as a starting basis that the battle for the next election is not about an Islamic

state, but how to restore justice, freedom, democracy and good governance," DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang said recently.

Moreover, the various opposition parties and groups have adopted Anwar as the figurehead for the so-called "reformasi" movement completely uncritically. Anwar joined UMNO in 1982 after being invited by Mahathir to run as one of its candidates and was rapidly elevated to ministerial posts. Until the eruption of the Asian economic crisis in 1997, he was a key Mahathir ally, never opposed the government's policies or its anti-democratic methods, and as a result was promoted to the positions of deputy prime minister and finance minister.

Anwar's falling out with Mahathir was over the policies to be pursued following Malaysia's economic collapse. One day before he sacked Anwar, Mahathir implemented sweeping currency and capital controls in an attempt to prop up failing Malaysian businesses, including those with close connections to UMNO. Anwar had advocated a further opening of the Malaysian economy to international investors in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund. Neither leader has any solution to the rising prices and levels of unemployment that have hit the working class.

The state elections in Sabah in northern Borneo due to be held on March 12-13 are likely to provide a further indication of the country's political instability. In the lead-up to the poll, three leading UMNO politicians, including two former deputy ministers, have resigned and joined the opposition Federation of Sabah People's Front Party (Bersekutu). While the campaign for the state's racially-based seats is likely to be dominated by local issues, the sensitivity of the Mahathir government to any opposition was highlighted by the decision to bar Anwar's wife from addressing a gathering in Sabah. In mid-February, Azizah was permitted to attend a gathering of 3,000 organised by the Islamic Youth Council of Malaysia just outside Sabah's capital and mingle with the guests, but was banned from delivering a speech.



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