

Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim found guilty in second frame-up trial

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Former Malaysian deputy Prime Minister and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was found guilty of sodomy and sentenced to nine years imprisonment by the High Court in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. The predictable verdict was the product of a frame-up organised from the office of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, aimed at undermining political opposition to the coalition government led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

Judge Arifin Jaka convicted Anwar, along with his adopted brother Sukma Darmawan, after a 138-day no-jury trial that was characterised by contradictory evidence, dubious witnesses and rulings by Arifin that openly favoured, and at times rescued, the prosecution case. The sentence will not begin until 2005, after Anwar completes the six-year sentence imposed in April 1999 on equally dubious charges of interfering with police investigations.

Rejecting any appeal for leniency, Anwar denounced the verdict from the dock as “political persecution”.

“I am the victim of political conspiracy through a web of intrigue orchestrated by the maestro Dr Mahathir,” he declared. “Despite strenuous appeals my counsel were prevented from questioning this witness. The pronouncement of your judgment today was a mere formality according to the pre-ordained script of the conspirators. This is a conviction based on conjecture and imagination. It has no legal basis. It is unjust, disgraceful and revolting.”

That the charges were both politically motivated and false is indisputable.

* Azizan Abu Bahar, the supposed victim of Anwar's lust and principal prosecution witness, only made his allegations in 1997 after a bitter struggle had begun inside UMNO between Mahathir and Anwar over the direction of economic policy and control of the

government. Beforehand, Azizan enjoyed good relations with Anwar's family, who employed him as a driver. He came forward with the charges on the urging of Ummi Halfida Ali, a businesswoman with close connections to Anwar's rivals in UMNO, including the current Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin.

* The date of the alleged sodomy, a crime under Malaysia's reactionary anti-homosexual laws, was changed three times in the course of the trial. The first date was May 1994. It was then changed to May 1992. After Anwar's defense revealed that the apartment building in which the act supposedly occurred had not even been built at that time, Judge Arifin allowed the prosecution to change the offense to 7:45pm, sometime between January and March 1993. Despite this, Anwar and his lawyers were able to account for his whereabouts on every single day of this three-month period.

* Despite public knowledge of the political context of Anwar's prosecution, Arifin and the judge at the first trial, Augustine Paul, continually asserted that there was no evidence of a political conspiracy against Anwar and that even if there were, it was irrelevant to the sodomy charges. Arifin used these assertions to refuse to allow the defence to put Mahathir on the stand.

* On February 11, Raja Kamarudin Abdul Wahid, an UMNO local branch head, testified that in 1998 Aziz Shamsuddin, Mahathir's long-time political secretary, had instructed him to organise a campaign to politically destroy Anwar and his supporters. Aziz told Raja Kamarudin that he had been responsible for circulating the *50 Reasons Why Anwar Cannot Become Prime Minister* booklet at the 1998 UMNO national conference in which unsupported claims of Anwar's misconduct were made. Raja Kamarudin testified that

Aziz alluded to a slush fund when he said that no expense should be spared in the campaign to frame-up Anwar. “He said he didn't care if the operation cost millions. He told me just to send him the bill.”

In his speech from the dock Anwar referred to the underlying reason for the trial. He told the court: “I objected to the use of massive public funds to rescue the failed businesses of his (Mahathir's) children and cronies.”

As the 1997 Asian financial crisis engulfed Malaysia, Anwar, representing a section of the Malaysian capitalist class, aligned himself with the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a fundamental restructuring of the economy and its opening to greater foreign investment and competition. As the Finance Minister, he instituted an austerity package that slashed government spending by 18 per cent, cut ministerial salaries and deferred major investment projects.

These measures ultimately aroused bitter opposition from Mahathir and the corporate elite around and inside the government, whose business empires had developed through government contracts, cheap credit, concessions and protection from foreign competition. Under conditions in which numbers of Malaysian companies were facing the threat of bankruptcy, Anwar declared: “There is no question of any bailout. The banks will be allowed to protect themselves and the government will not interfere.”

The split within the Malaysian ruling class erupted at the June 1998 UMNO national conference. Anwar and his supporters challenged Mahathir's leadership under the cover of an attack on the nepotism and cronyism in UMNO and the government, which Anwar had been part of for 17 years. Mahathir supporters distributed the *50 Reasons Why Anwar Cannot Be Prime Minister* booklet and used these allegations in an unsuccessful attempt to compel Anwar to resign.

Securing the majority within the government over the following months, Mahathir introduced currency and capital controls on September 1, 1998, in defiance of the IMF. The next day Anwar was sacked from the ministry and, along with hundreds of his supporters, expelled from UMNO.

Anwar's attacks on the nepotism of Mahathir's rule, however, met up with discontent over growing social inequality and the decades-long suppression of democratic rights in Malaysia. When the Anwar wing

of the ruling class attempted to exploit these popular sentiments for its own agenda, the government moved. Anwar was arrested on September 20, after he led a demonstration of 50,000 people in Kuala Lumpur demanding economic and political reforms.

Anwar was initially detained under the draconian Internal Security Act, which allows detention without trial on security grounds. The subsequent charges of corruption and sodomy were manufactured to ensure he never left prison.

In the two years since Anwar's initial imprisonment, popular dissatisfaction with the state of society has continued to grow. This latest conviction will only serve to heighten the opposition to the political, legal and economic system in Malaysia.

Conscious of this, Anwar has sought to mould himself as a symbol of the aspirations of the common people and channel opposition to the regime behind the National Justice Party, founded by his wife and supporters. As he closed his court address yesterday, he issued a warning to his one-time mentor: “To Dr Mahathir and his greedy family and cronies, I say beware the wrath of the people. For the people are rising to reclaim justice. They are siding against graft and abuse of power.”



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