

# Malaysian opposition leader arrested: an act of political desperation

**John Roberts**  
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In what is a sign of political desperation on the part of the Malaysian government, police yesterday arrested leading opposition figure Anwar Ibrahim, subjected him to three hours of interrogation, and detained him overnight. The arrest over trumped-up charges of sodomy and its timing are aimed at politically undermining Anwar and the opposition right at the point when the government confronts potential splits in its own ranks and motions of no confidence in parliament.

The manner in which the arrest was carried out was highly provocative. More than a dozen police, including commandos in balaclavas, blocked off the street outside Anwar's home, dragged him from his car and took him off to police headquarters. According to his lawyer Sankara Nair, police gave no reason for the arrest. Nair also pointed out that Anwar had already agreed to present himself to the police for questioning at 2 p.m. The arrest took place an hour earlier, at 1 p.m.

The arrest was a virtual re-run of Anwar's arrest in 1998 when, amid mounting opposition protests against the government, he was detained, assaulted by the country's police chief and then tried and convicted on bogus charges of corruption and sodomy. The Malaysian Federal Court eventually overturned the sodomy charge in 2004, acknowledging the original conviction was based on "unreliable" evidence.

A decade later, Anwar again finds himself facing accusations of sodomy by a former aide, Mohammed Saiful Bukhari Azian. Anwar has insisted that the allegations are malicious fabrications designed to sabotage the opposition campaign and prevent his entry to parliament via a by-election. He had been banned from parliament until this year as a result of his corruption conviction. Senior officials of his Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan) allege that Saiful was planted by the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and claim to have pictures showing him with leading government figures.

Anwar's wife Wan Seri Azzizah Wan, who is currently Keadilan parliamentary leader, yesterday expressed concern that Anwar would suffer a repeat of the 1998 assault that left him with a serious back injury. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi yesterday offered a guarantee that Anwar would be safe in custody. Home Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar

blandly declared that the police were acting according to the law and that the arrest was not politically motivated. However, no credence can be placed in these claims. As home minister in 1998, Abdullah was intimately involved in the campaign by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to politically destroy Anwar.

Yesterday afternoon 600 of Anwar's supporters gathered outside police headquarters soon after the arrest, with 200 staying on for a candlelight vigil before being dispersed by police using water cannon. Husin Ali, an official with the opposition coalition Peoples Front (PKR), denounced the arrest as part of a political conspiracy and said that the aim of detaining Anwar was to fabricate evidence. "I don't believe the police have any concrete evidence... so they arrest him, to force or collect evidence. The police want to know where exactly he was on that day (when the sodomy was alleged) so that they can make a charge."

Anwar's lawyer R. Sivarasa also raised questions about police attempts to take a DNA sample from Anwar. While the docile local media carried articles highlighting Anwar's refusal to provide a sample, Sivarasa noted that the police already had Anwar's DNA profile from the 1998 case. The police and the government are yet to explain what additional testing is required. Sivarasa protested the failure of the police to abide by their promise to release Anwar after his interrogation.

The arrest comes amid a mounting crisis for the government. In March, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) suffered a serious election setback, winning only 140 seats in the 222-seat parliament and losing its crucial two-thirds majority required to amend the constitution. The opposition parties—Keadilan, the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) and the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) increased their parliamentary numbers from 19 to 82. The vote not only undermined UMNO's hold on parliament but cut across the racially based electoral divide fostered by UMNO over decades.

The opposition parties gained power in five of the country's 13 states, including several of the most economically important. Rising prices for food and fuel have continued to undermine the government's popularity. Bitter recriminations inside UMNO have fuelled a campaign led by former Prime Minister Mahathir

to force Abdullah to step aside. The prime minister has now been forced to set 2010 as the date for leaving office, but a move to oust him far sooner cannot be ruled out.

Abdullah's favoured successor, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak, is embroiled in a serious scandal of his own involving the murder in October 2006 of a Mongolian woman, Altantuya Shaariibu. Najib's political adviser Abdul Razak Baginda and two bodyguards are on trial for the killing.

The drawn-out trial had been conducted in such a way to keep out Najib's name. But he was directly linked to the case when a private detective Balasubramaniam Perumal claimed that Najib had had a sexual relationship with the victim. Najib has denied the allegation and that he had tried to cover up the connection. The private investigator subsequently retracted the allegation but then disappeared this month along with his entire family in unexplained circumstances.

Amid growing signs of splits within the government, Anwar, who is recognised as de facto opposition leader despite lacking a parliamentary seat, went on the offensive. He announced last month that the opposition had enough support inside the ruling BN coalition to form its own government and even set a date—September 16.

On July 6, 20,000 people defied police intimidation and attended an opposition rally in Kuala Lumpur to protest the government's fuel price increases and to listen to Anwar's plans to form a new government. Anwar used the opportunity to denounce the accusations against him. The opposition leader has said he will not only fight any charges in court but instigate legal proceedings of his own to expose his accuser and the involvement of government figures.

On Monday, police took the extraordinary measure of obtaining a court order to prevent Anwar or anyone else from approaching any closer than five kilometres from the parliament building. The opposition had planned a protest outside parliament to coincide with a move by its parliamentarians to debate a "crisis of confidence in the government". Police mobilised an estimated 1,600 officers to block some 2,000 protestors who were expected to turn up. Inside parliament, the speaker ruled the debate out of order.

On Tuesday, Anwar debated Information Minister Ahmad Shabery Cheek on national television over the government's widely resented 41 percent oil price hike. He once again reaffirmed the opposition's intention to wrest control of the parliament from the BN.

Earlier yesterday, Anwar went to the offices of the Anti-Corruption Agency where he made a statement alleging that Inspector General of Police Musa Hasan and Attorney General Abdul Gani Patail had been involved in fabricating evidence in the 1998 cases against him. The obvious danger for Prime Minister Abdullah was that he might also have been eventually implicated.

Anwar's arrest is likely to spur on opposition to the government. A recent survey conducted by the *Malaysiakini*

web site found that 94.4 percent believed the sodomy allegations against Anwar were politically motivated. Another by the Merdeka Centre found that 60 percent thought the charges were politically motivated and only six percent believed the allegations were true.

Behind the political tensions, there are also bitter unresolved differences in the country's ruling elite over the direction of economic policy, which first erupted during the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis. Anwar, who was then deputy prime minister and finance minister, strongly advocated free market policies based on the IMF and World Bank prescriptions to open up Malaysia to foreign capital. Prime Minister Mahathir, who feared that UMNO's business cronies would be bankrupted, dismissed Anwar, expelled him and his supporters from the party and instituted currency and capital controls.

It is not surprising that a new political crisis has erupted amid growing signs of fragility in the Malaysian economy. Anwar is backed by layers of business who are critical of Abdullah for failing to ditch Mahathir's policies fast enough and embrace free market policies. Inside UMNO, Abdullah is under fire from Mahathir and his supporters for going too far and threatening Malay business entrepreneurs.

Fighting for its political life, the government is once again resorting to the police-state measures that it has used repeatedly during its 50-year rule to suppress any political opposition. Amid the current global economic turmoil, it is unlikely that the old methods will work for long. The *Financial Times* noted that the Malaysian ringgit immediately weakened after Anwar's arrest and the KLSE share index was down 23 percent for the year. Far from resolving the current crisis, the arrest of Anwar is likely to spur it on.



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