

Malaysia: Anwar contests by-election despite being charged

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Anwar Ibrahim, the de facto leader of the opposition Malaysian Peoples Front (PKR), nominated on Saturday for the August 26 by-election in the seat of Permatang Pauh, which was made vacant by the resignation of his wife. Anwar is seeking to re-enter parliament despite facing a politically motivated charge of sodomy. His aim is to bring down the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-dominated Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government that has held power for 51 years.

Anwar is expected to comfortably win Permatang Pauh, an electorate in Penang with a 69 percent ethnic Malay population but sizeable numbers of ethnic Chinese and Indian voters. His wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, took the seat in the March election with 30,338 votes, compared to 13,388 for UMNO's candidate. Anwar claims that his return to the parliament will convince enough BN parliamentarians to defect to the opposition and enable it to form a new government on September 16.

If he is convicted of sodomy—which remains a serious crime in Malaysia—Anwar will be expelled from parliament and could face up to 20 years in jail. He was formally charged on August 6 and is campaigning while on bail. He is due to appear in court again on September 10.

New evidence confirms that the charge is a blatant frame-up. The original claim by a former aide of Anwar, Mohamad Saiful Bukhari Azlan, was that Anwar sodomised him without his consent—i.e., that he was raped. After Anwar produced strong alibi evidence, the charge was changed to consensual “carnal intercourse against the course of nature”, which the prosecution believes will be harder for Anwar to disprove.

More damaging for the prosecution case, however, was the leaking of the results of the June 26 medical examination of Saiful just hours after he alleged he had been sodomised. The doctor found there was no trace of any act of sodomy.

According to the ~~opposition~~ website Mohamed Osman Hamid, who conducted the original examination at the Hospital Pusrawi, has gone into hiding in order to avoid being intimidated to change his report. The *Star* reported on August 15 that the hospital sacked Osman for not reporting for work since August 1. After the leak, the hospital claimed that a “gut specialist” had to do such checks, “not a medical officer”. The doctor has reportedly issued a statutory declaration in which he stood by the result of his examination.

Saiful claims that he underwent a second test at Hospital Kuala Lumpur, the report of which has not been released. Anwar, in an interview with *Asia Times Online*, stated that the second medical report also rules out assault or sodomy.

The attempt to frame Anwar on a sodomy charge is a measure of both UMNO's desperation and determination to cling onto power. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi clearly takes seriously Anwar's claims that he has support inside sections of the 14-party ruling coalition. The trumped-up charge is a rather obvious attempt to prevent Anwar's return to parliament and shore up the government's shaky hold on power.

The UMNO leadership has been rattled since gaining only 140 seats in the 222-seat parliament in the March national elections. The opposition coalition between Anwar's Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan), the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), increased its seats from 19 to 82 and gained power in five of the country's 13 states. The coalition has been increasing its popular support since.

Mass discontent over rising prices, including a 41 percent increase in the price of fuel on June 5, has deepened discontent with UMNO's racially-based political and economic policies, which predominantly benefit a section of the ethnic Malay elite that has

connections to the ruling party. Inflation is running at a 26-year high of 7.7 percent, eroding the living standards of the vast majority of the population.

Anwar's campaign against UMNO dates back to his split with former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad over the government's response to the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis. Anwar, then deputy prime minister and finance minister, advocated tearing down long-standing protectionist measures and implementing the free-market restructuring demanded by the International Monetary Fund and international investors.

Instead Mahathir introduced currency and capital controls to protect Malay businesses that depended on UMNO patronage and were threatened by the opening up of the economy to foreign competition. Anwar was sacked from his posts and expelled from the ruling party. When he initiated an opposition movement, the government responded by having him arrested on trumped-up charges of corruption and sodomy. He was found guilty of corruption in 1999 and sentenced to six years imprisonment. In 2000, he was found guilty of sodomy and sentenced to a further nine years.

In 2004, the Federal Court squashed the sodomy conviction and ordered Anwar's release. It upheld the corruption conviction, however, which, under Malaysia's electoral laws, rendered Anwar ineligible to stand for political office until April this year. Badawi called early elections in February in large part to ensure that Anwar could not be a candidate. The Peoples Justice Party announced during the campaign that one of its victorious candidates would resign in order to trigger a by-election. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail did so on July 31.

Anwar and the PKR speak for growing sections of Malaysian big business who believe that the UMNO regime is sidelining the country from global investment flows by its protectionist policies. While Abdullah Badawi has implemented some of the restructuring measures advocated by Anwar, he has continued the government support for politically-connected ethnic Malay-owned companies.

Since 1998, Anwar has used denunciations of UMNO nepotism and appeals for racial equality to channel popular discontent behind his free-market perspective. In the by-election campaign, he has made the populist promise that a PKR government will reduce the price of petrol back to the level before Abdullah slashed subsidies on June 5.

The latest sodomy allegation has had little impact on Anwar's ability to attract support and has only heightened

the anger at the BN government. An opinion poll conducted this month by the Merdeka Centre found that 66 percent of respondents believe the charge was politically motivated and only 31 percent believed the police would handle the case fairly. Appearances by Anwar in recent weeks have drawn crowds of tens of thousands.

Lim Kit Siang, the chairman of the DAP, told Agence France Presse: "It is not called the mother of by-elections for nothing. It is an indication of national politics and of our track record so far, it is a barometer of politics in Malaysia at large. If Anwar succeeds in pulling in a large number of Malay votes, it will boost the opposition's standing and the road to forming the next government will be clearer."

UMNO is responding with attempts to provoke racial unrest and outright intimidation of voters. Anwar claimed yesterday that the ruling party was sending SMS messages to ethnic Malay villagers that labelled him "an agent of the Chinese". Over 3,000 police have been deployed into the Permatang Pauh electorate, ostensibly to prevent disturbances. Students at Universiti Sains Malaysia, where there is considerable support for Anwar, were threatened with expulsion if they took part in the by-election campaign, on the grounds that it would be a breach of the Universities and University Colleges Act.

The increasingly volatile battle within the Malaysian ruling elite is provoking concerns in international financial circles. Malaysia's key stock index has fallen 22 percent this year while those of the Philippines and Thailand have risen 3.6 and 1.4 percent respectively. Reuters noted on August 6 that the prospect of political instability and a slowing economy had "unsettled investors," who were also worried about the "populist policies" from both the Anwar and UMNO camps. There are fears that if Anwar does not win, his supporters will take to the streets in protest.



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