

Anwar's landslide win: a further blow to Malaysian government

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Anwar Ibrahim, leader of the opposition Malaysian Peoples Front (PKR), won a hotly contested by-election for the seat of Permatang Pauh on Tuesday with 67 percent of the vote. The scale of the win in the northern state of Penang will see Anwar back in the national parliament for the first time in a decade and intensify the opposition's confrontation with the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.

Anwar has set September 16 as the date by which he would form a new government by enticing government MPs to his side. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which is the major party in the ruling 14-party Barisan Nasional (BN), has held power for more than half a century. The PKR alliance won 82 of the 222 seats in the national parliament in elections in March and needs 30 MPs to switch camps to bring down the government.

Anwar was unable to run for a seat in March due to a ban stemming from his conviction on trumped-up charges in 1999. His wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail resigned her seat to create the by-election. Despite a malicious campaign against him, Anwar won 31,195 votes to 15,524 for the BN candidate Arif Shah Omar Shah—an increase of 3 percentage points from his wife's result in March.

At a post-election press conference, Anwar described the vote as “a defining moment in our history”. In opposition to UMNO's racially discriminatory policies, he declared: “The message is clear, we in Permatang Pauh and the Malaysian people—Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans, Kadazans, demand freedom and justice in this country. We want an independent judiciary and we want an economy to benefit the mass majority and not the corrupt few, sons and son-in-laws.”

Anwar held the press conference with the general-secretary of the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Parry (DAP), Lim Kit Siang, and the vice president of the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), Datuk Husam

Musa—partners with Anwar's Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan) in the PKR coalition. Asked about the September 16 deadline to form a new government, Anwar simply said it would be discussed in the PKR leadership.

The by-election was crucial for both the government and opposition. The UMNO leadership threw everything into the campaign to prevent Anwar's return to parliament or at least reduce the opposition's majority from the March poll. Prime Minister Abdullah and his deputy Najib Razak personally campaigned in the electorate. Najib, Abdullah's nominated successor, described the campaign as a “titanic struggle”.

Central to the UMNO efforts was a new allegation of sodomy against Anwar, which was concocted after he threatened to bring down the government. Police formally charged the opposition leader on August 16 and if convicted he faces a jail term of up to 20 years and automatic expulsion from parliament. He is due to appear in court on September 10.

As the by-election campaign began, Anwar's accuser—a former aide Mohamad Saiful Bukhari Azlan—was wheeled out from hiding to swear on the Koran that Anwar had sex with him. Obviously designed to discredit Anwar and appeal to religious backwardness, the ploy failed even among the country's Malay Muslim majority. The election result confirmed what opinion polls previously indicated: the vast majority of Malaysians regarded the charges as politically motivated.

The crude frame-up is a repetition of the charges brought against Anwar in 1998 when he was deputy prime minister and finance minister in the government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. The two fell out over the direction of economic policy in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. While Anwar advocated the economic restructuring measures pushed by the IMF, Mahathir insisted on imposing capital and currency controls to protect businesses aligned with UMNO.

Mahathir stripped Anwar of his posts and expelled him and his supporters from UMNO. When Anwar started to address large anti-government protests, he was arrested, beaten by the country's police chief and subsequently convicted on bogus charges of corruption in 1999 and sodomy in 2000. He served six years in jail before the Federal Court squashed the second charge in 2004 on the grounds of "unreliable" evidence.

The new case against Anwar is just as threadbare. Anwar has provided a detailed account of his timetable, which demonstrates he could not have been with Saiful at the time alleged. The opposition has also produced evidence demonstrating that Saiful has met with senior UMNO figures, including Deputy Prime Minister Najib. In the course of the by-election campaign, UMNO and the pro-government media exploited salacious details of Saiful's allegations to smear Anwar's name.

The charge was not the only aspect of UMNO's dirty tricks campaign. On the eve of the election, five opposition figures in the PKR-controlled state of Perak, including two cabinet members, were charged over corruption involving a housing project. Keadilan denounced the move as an obvious attempt to discredit Anwar. The charges dovetailed with allegations in the press of corruption by Anwar while in office.

UMNO also denounced Anwar as "anti-Malay" and an agent of the Chinese population for his promises to dismantle UMNO's New Economic Policy (NEP), which discriminates against the country's ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities in education, business and government jobs. The deputy leader of the UMNO youth wing, Khairy Jamaluddin, branded Anwar as a "US agent".

The pro-government *Star* newspaper pointed to numerous pamphlets that attacked Anwar, including one that depicted an Anwar cabinet with three deputy prime ministers—none of whom was Malay. The BBC reported that a number of Israeli flags suddenly appeared in the electorate in an apparent attempt to link Anwar to Israel and its repression of the Palestinians.

Last Friday, when it became clear that these appeals to religious and racist bigotry were not working, the government announced a cut in fuel prices, which it had hiked up 41 percent on June 5. In a further move to intimidate voters, more than 3,000 police were flooded into the electorate. The heavy police presence caused major traffic jams on polling day.

The failure of UMNO to make any headway in the by-election points to a significant shift both in the Malaysian ruling elite and among the population as a whole. Broad

layers of voters, including among the Malay majority, are fed up with UMNO's autocratic methods of rule and have illusions that Anwar will improve their lot. Rising prices and declining living standards have further fuelled anti-government sentiment among working people. Many poorer Malays have responded to Anwar's accusation that the NEP has only benefitted a wealthy elite.

It should be recalled that Anwar was a prominent UMNO figure until 1998 and backed the government's repressive methods and its communal NEP program to the hilt. If he has shifted his stance, it is only because the requirements of the Malaysian ruling class have also changed.

Sections of business are now backing Anwar because he is committed to carrying out pro-market reforms, which will inevitably deepen the divide between rich and poor. They regard UMNO's policies of economic regulation, including its discrimination in favour of Malays, as a barrier to the closer integration of Malaysia into the globalised processes of production. Under conditions of an economic slowdown in the country's main export markets, the pressures from the corporate elite for economic "reform" have become more urgent. The local stock market has plunged by nearly 25 percent so far this year.

Within UMNO, recriminations have already begun following the election loss. Prominent UMNO figure and former finance minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah called for Prime Minister Abdullah to go before the next party conference in December. "It is time to face the music," he said. "[Abdullah] does not have the minimal credibility needed to run the country day by day, let alone take it in the new directions we need."

It remains to be seen if Anwar can pull off a parliamentary coup next month. However, one thing is certain: UMNO will not surrender its control without a bitter fight, in which nothing can be ruled out—from populist economic promises to further political provocations and outright police-state measures.



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