

Malaysia**Sodomy and the backlash**

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A sweeping by-election victory takes Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition leader, a step closer to power. The government seems blind to the danger signals



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AFTER an ugly, mudslinging campaign, a by-election on August 26th in the northern constituency of Permatang Pauh may have changed Malaysia's political landscape permanently. The stakes were high. The main opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, bidding to return to parliament, had to win convincingly to keep up the momentum of his drive to unseat the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its allies, which have ruled since independence from Britain in 1957. The government, which lost its two-thirds majority (needed to change the constitution) in a general election in March, wanted at least to deny Mr Anwar a big majority. But he won by almost 16,000 votes, 2,000 more than in March, when his wife (with Mr Anwar above) defended the seat.

So Mr Anwar's second shot at power remains on track. Ten years ago he was deputy prime minister and UMNO's heir-apparent. But he was brought down by trumped-up charges of "sodomy", a crime in Malaysia, after falling out with the then leader, Mahathir Mohamad. Mr Anwar was jailed for this and a further charge of corruption, then freed in 2004 after Dr Mahathir had handed the reins of power to the current prime minister, Abdullah Badawi. Mr Anwar has since built an unlikely opposition alliance. His own, multiracial People's Justice Party (PKR) has teamed up with both the Islamic Party (PAS), which appeals to Malaysia's Muslim, ethnic-Malay majority, and the firmly secular Democratic Action Party (DAP), whose main base is the ethnic-Chinese minority.

In June, soon after a ban on Mr Anwar's holding political office expired, a young male aide made familiar-sounding accusations of sodomy, for which Mr Anwar will, again, go on trial soon. The government insists this is no put-up job, though to its embarrassment it soon emerged that the accuser had met Mr Badawi's deputy, Najib Razak, and other government officials. In the by-election campaign, the government side constantly played video clips of Mr Anwar's accuser swearing on the Koran that his allegations were true. In turn, the opposition reminded voters of the gruesome murder of a Mongolian woman, over which one of Mr Najib's advisers and two police bodyguards are on trial.

Little of the mud slung in Mr Anwar's direction seemed to stick. According to a poll by Merdeka Centre, an opinion-research outfit, the weekend before the by-election, 59% of voters in Permatang Pauh thought the sodomy allegation politically motivated, and only 11% deemed it the main issue in the election, compared with 32% who thought the economy was. Mr Anwar promises to abolish the policy of giving Malays preference for state jobs and contracts, arguing that it has mainly benefited the well-connected few. Ethnic Malays, by voting for Mr Anwar in large numbers, seem to have rejected the government's charge that he is a traitor to

his race.

Zaid Ibrahim, a lawyer whom Mr Badawi recently brought into his cabinet to lead the reform of a corrupt judiciary, says the lesson from the by-election is that voters are tired of personal attacks, and of the “overkill” tactics the government turns on its opponents. It should, says Mr Zaid, start showing the opposition some respect and engage it in a policy debate.

Other ministers, however, are much more relaxed about the by-election defeat. Shabery Cheek, the information minister, argues that the governing coalition has recovered from similar setbacks before. Furthermore, he says, Mr Anwar was campaigning in his home constituency, in a seat he used to occupy before his 1998 troubles, so his comfortable win was not that significant. Syed Hamid Albar, the home minister, notes that voters still gave the UMNO-led coalition a majority in the general election: this shows, he argues, that they still want the government in power, even if they also want to give the opposition a stronger voice.

For Bridget Welsh, an American academic who studies Malaysia, this laid-back view suggests that much of the government is “in denial” about the message the voters are sending. Hitherto, says Ms Welsh, Malaysians have been rather risk-averse. But ministers may be underestimating the effect that access to uncensored news, via the internet, is having in changing people’s views. To relieve the pressure for his resignation over the March election upset, Mr Badawi has promised to hand over to Mr Najib in 2010. Ms Welsh notes that since Mr Najib is popular within UMNO, but is seen outside it as a hardliner, his rise may not solve the party’s problem with voters.

Mr Anwar claims he is close to prising enough parliamentarians from the government benches to give him a parliamentary majority—he even boasts of taking power by September 16th, Malaysia Day. But this will be a tall order. His alliance has 82 seats in the 222-seat lower house. He would need comfortably more than the minimum of 30 floor-crossers to form a stable government—and in practice most would need to be Malays, ie, from UMNO rather than its non-Malay coalition partners. Most potential defectors will be loth to jump ship unless they feel sure the government is about to collapse.

Mr Anwar says it is not that important if he does not get enough defections by September 16th. He argues that the “climate of change” among the public, especially the Malays, means that the momentum behind him is now unstoppable. However, Tricia Yeoh, of the Centre for Public Policy Studies, a think-tank, says that to maintain it, the opposition leader must urgently press on with forming a credible shadow cabinet, to show that his disparate alliance has the “seriousness and capability” to take on the job of government.

What if UMNO does fall, either through defections in the short term or by losing the next election, and Malaysia gets its first alternation of power? Many institutions of state—especially the police, courts and civil service—are deeply politicised. But Ong Kian Ming, a political scientist, reckons that most would fall in line if the opposition takes power, as long as Mr Anwar avoids provoking them needlessly. Most big Malaysian businesses, despite their cosiness with the current government, would also prefer an Anwar government to a prolonged period of political instability. In the meantime the government looks likely to do everything it can to retain power. Except, it still seems, the one thing that might work: showing some tangible progress on the reforms Mr Badawi keeps promising but never provides.