



Viewpoints contain background analyses and comments on critical global and regional trends, issues and developments. *Viewpoints* also occasionally include analytical reviews of ISEAS books. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of ISEAS.

A severe test for Pakatan Rakyat

**Will the alliance continue to work together
no matter what happens to Anwar Ibrahim?**

**By
OOI KEE BENG**

Weekend Voices, TODAY | Feb 13, 2010
(also published in *The Malaysian Insider*)

IT IS A strange trial taking place in Malaysia at the moment; strange because no matter what the verdict turns out to be, the public perception of what is taking place will remain the same.

Indeed, it is impossible for any observer of Malaysian politics to consider the sodomy charge against former Deputy Prime Minister, and now opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, a purely legal matter.

The mere fact that his imprisonment and his removal as a parliamentarian, should he be convicted, will make the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition suffer its biggest blow makes it difficult for many to believe that no political agenda is involved.

For one thing, this is the second time that Anwar and his family are being made to suffer the indignity of sexually explicit legal proceedings.

His arrest in 1998 for sodomy and abuse of power led to the formation of the Reformasi Movement that a decade later denied the Barisan Nasional (BN) its traditional two-thirds majority in Parliament.

This time around, there will no doubt be demonstrations should he be jailed but these will hardly be on the same scale as before. This is partly because there was no other way of challenging the Umno-led government back in 1998.

After March 8, 2008, the most reliable road to power for the opposition is through the ballot box.

The trial is, therefore, a severe test for the PR.

Mr Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, who is a Member of Parliament for Seri Setia from Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat, admits that Anwar's leadership is crucial to the opposition coalition.

"We will not allow Anwar to be imprisoned", Mr Nik Nazmi, who was also Anwar's private secretary in 2006-2008, told this writer.

Nevertheless, insider analysts, including the 28-year-old Nik Nazmi, agree that things are essentially different now when compared to 10 years ago, when Anwar was also charged - and sentenced - for sodomy. The conviction was overturned six years later.

Basically, at least four factors are making the difference.

First, a young crop of leaders has come to the fore, consisting of individuals once inspired by the Reformasi and now hardened by frontal battles fought against the BN in recent years.

Many are now entrenched in positions of power. Some are parliamentarians, while others work for the four state governments run by the PR.

Mr Liew Chin Tong, for example, the 32-year-old MP for Bukit Bendera, Penang, and author of the recent book, *Speaking for the Reformasi Generation*, admits that the results of the general election were possible only because Anwar was there to unite the opposition.

"But post-March 8, cooperation among Pakatan parties occurs at all levels. Anwar's role remains symbolic at the national level, but otherwise, day-to-day relationships cement the coalition in the states that we govern. These ties go a long way. They won't collapse just because Anwar is not there," Mr Liew said.

The second factor - and this may be decisive - is that the shift in the balance of power has made it thinkable to many Malaysians who had feared the uncertainties that must accompany serious change, that the BN can be toppled.

This new mindset is being sustained inexorably by websites and Internet newspapers, which continue to grow in popularity by fuelling the debate that national governance must improve if the economy is to grow.

Thirdly, the multi-racial stand that the PR has been taking is being widely acknowledged, especially after Parti Islam SeMalaysia agreed with the High Court decision that non-Muslims could use the word "Allah" outside of missionary contexts.

Lastly, PR's strength comes from BN's weakness; basically the latter's essential inability to project a new image that is not stained by abuse of power, political opportunism, administrative incompetence and racial partisanship.

Ms Tricia Yeoh, research officer to Selangor's Menteri Besar, is certain that the opposition parties will succeed in working together.

"They have been cooperating closely and concretely for two years now, and know that this is actually possible. Sure, without Anwar, the philosophical glue holding them together will not be quite as strong, but the respective PR state governments will continue functioning. The deeper worry for these young people seems to lie, not at the practical level, but at the ideological level," said Ms Yeoh, 30.

Without Anwar, the PR will trudge on because it has to. But it may increasingly be because it is politically expedient to do so, and because power is within reach.

The fear is that the PR's aspirations may soon be overshadowed by the defensive manoeuvres it adopts to neutralise BN attacks.

The PR may begin to lose its ideological impetus. Indeed, that is perhaps what the BN is hoping for.

☞ voices@mediacorp.com.sg

The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. His latest book (co-edited with Goh Ban Lee) is *Pilot Studies for a New Penang*.