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Malaysia's voter revolt continues

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28 August 2008 | TODAY Newspaper, Singapore

*Huge support Anwar received
in polls shows that the
BN's initiative backfired*

IN GAINING a substantially bigger victory margin than his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail did in the March 8 general elections (15,671 to 13,398), Mr Anwar Ibrahim's coalition continues its march towards federal power.

The former Deputy Prime Minister and former Finance Minister managed to secure 67 per cent of votes cast in the pivotal byelection held on Tuesday in his home base of Permatang Pauh in the state of Penang. The turnout of 81.01 per cent was surprisingly high, given the fact that it rained heavily in the area that day. This allayed fears that voters would stay away because of tension on the streets.

Declaring his triumph a landslide, the *de facto* leader of the opposition in Malaysia returns to Parliament after ten trying years. As a people's representative in the august house, Mr Anwar will be better able to convince fence-sitters in the governing coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), that his Pakatan Rakyat (People's Pact) opposition alliance is worth crossing over to. His sights seem to be set on the East Malaysian states where he is taking advantage of dissatisfaction among BN component parties over what they see as haughty treatment towards them by the federal government on the peninsula.

Mr Anwar's choice of Sept 16 as the day on which he will move against the government is therefore done largely for symbolic reasons. That was the day 45 years ago when the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, along with Singapore, joined Malaya to form Malaysia. With the stakes being as high as they are now, Mr Anwar's victory holds great significance for the immediate stability of the country.

Permatang Pauh represents the first occasion after the March 8 elections that voters have had to express any regret they may have had about voting so strongly against the government. The increased margin for Mr Anwar shows that voters have no regrets, and are in fact continuing their revolt against the federal government.

This means that the pressure on Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration increases further. His schedule to stay in power until mid-2010 — which has locked his deputy, Mr Najib Abdul Razak, into a continued position of loyalty — looks less likely to be entertained by his dominant party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), in the coming months.

Furthermore, the fact that Mr Najib was so strongly involved in leading the campaign against Mr Anwar makes the BN's defeat a personal one for him. The loser in this by-election is not Umno's candidate, state executive councillor Arif Shah Omar Shah. It is instead the Abdullah-Najib team. They will now have to answer to the party.

With the Malay ground more split than it was on March 8, over questions of swearing on the Quran, rising prices and multiracialism, Umno division heads will find it harder to stay quietly loyal to a leadership that is dismally failing to stop the biggest challenge to the party in its history. Putting changes on hold, as Mr Abdullah's retirement schedule seems to aim at doing, will satisfy Umno's many warlords even less after the opposition's latest success.

The government is not being accused of having done nothing though. It is commonly alleged to be behind the sodomy charge against Mr Anwar, for example. In fact, it was this factor that forced Anwar's hand. In response to it, his wife resigned as a Member of Parliament for Permatang Pauh, forcing the government to call the by-election.

Since then, the alleged "victim" of the sodomy, Mr Anwar's former aide Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan, has sworn on the Quran that all he had said was true. More surprisingly, Mr Najib, the target of rumours claiming he was involved in the murder of a Mongolian woman, also went through a similar controversial ritual.

Mr Anwar's refusal to do likewise and swear that he had not committed sodomy seemed at first to hurt his standing among Malay voters. However, the huge support he received in the polls shows that the BN's initiative actually backfired. Bringing religious rituals into the basically secular business of voting did not go down well with the electorate.

The sodomy trial is set for Sept 10 though, and Mr Anwar will have to appear in court on that day. His camp is worried for his safety, and will do all it can to keep him from being detained.

Besides this serious legal hurdle, Mr Anwar has to contend with an administrative impediment suddenly put in place by Mr Abdullah. The Prime Minister is presenting the annual budget at a surprisingly early time tomorrow. This reschedule includes Parliament going into immediate recess thereafter, to reconvene only on Oct 13, after the fasting month and subsequent open houses.

Any plans by Mr Anwar to make a dramatic move in Parliament on September 16, for example through a no-confidence motion against the government, is therefore quashed. Mr Abdullah is aware, as is Mr Anwar, that in politics, forcing a plan to be postponed increases the likelihood of it being discarded completely.

The confrontation between the two coalitions is coming to a head, and as recent events in Malaysian politics show, we cannot but continue to expect the unexpected.

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