

## Malaysia's Anwar faces career-breaking sodomy trial

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KUALA LUMPUR - Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim faces trial Tuesday on sodomy charges that threaten to neutralise the former deputy premier who was sacked and jailed on similar allegations a decade ago.

Anwar spent six years in prison before rallying the opposition to stunning gains in 2008 elections, in the most potent challenge ever faced by the multi-ethnic coalition that has ruled Malaysia for half a century.

He has condemned the new allegations levelled by a 24-year-old former aide, which could see him jailed for up to 20 years, as a conspiracy to end his political career and raised doubts he will get a fair hearing.

"I'm shocked with the (government's) impunity to go on with such a case despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary," he said last week.

The trial was originally due to start last July but has been repeatedly delayed as the defence team pursued legal manoeuvres including bids to obtain access to prosecution evidence like medical reports and CCTV footage.

Anwar's lawyer Sankara Nair said he would file another delay application at the start of Tuesday's hearing in the High Court but said there seemed to be a campaign to push ahead with the trial.

"The fact that they're not giving us certain crucial documents which they ought to give us has certainly had an emasculating effect in our preparation of the defence," he told AFP Monday.

Human rights group Amnesty International has sharply criticised the charges against Anwar, who in his first trial was brought to court with a black eye after a vicious beating from the police chief.

"The Malaysian authorities have resorted to the same old dirty tricks in an attempt to remove the opposition leader from politics," Amnesty Asia-Pacific director Sam Zarifi said in a statement.

"Anwar's case has rightly raised doubts among the international community and investors about Malaysia's commitment to justice and the rule of law."

The trial looms after a torrid few months in Malaysian politics, with the opposition beset by infighting and the government struggling to handle a religious row that has seen places of worship firebombed and vandalised.



Anwar Ibrahim

Bridget Welsh, a Southeast Asia analyst from Singapore Management University, said the trial was a "high-risk strategy" for Prime Minister Najib Razak, who came to power last year on a reform platform.

"The fact that the trial is moving forward is already damaging. They can't get away from the fact that they seem to be victimising the leader of the opposition," she said.

"It's also going to be seen as a test for Najib and his government over the type of tactics they use and how they carry out and implement power."

Welsh said the trial, which defence lawyers say could drag on for up to eight months in a high-profile test for Malaysia's much-criticised justice system, could prove to be a "long, painful process for both sides".

"The trial is going to continue to test the coherence of the opposition as a whole, it will raise doubts over Anwar among some in the opposition," she said of the 62-year-old who is struggling to maintain party discipline.

Anwar, a married father of six, was a star finance minister before being sacked in 1998 amid a policy row with then-premier Mahathir Mohamad during the Asian economic crisis.

He was convicted of sodomy and corruption but the sex charge was overturned and he was freed in 2004.

Mass protests broke out when he was jailed a decade ago and he has said he "cannot preclude" a repeat of those turbulent days if he is convicted once again.