

Anwar threatens to subpoena Malaysia PM

By Kevin Brown in Singapore

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Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's embattled opposition leader, on Tuesday threatened to subpoena Najib Razak, the prime minister, as he went on trial for the second time on charges of sodomy.

Mr Anwar, whose opposition coalition poses the most serious threat to the ruling National Front for more than half a century, claims the charges have been trumped up by the government for political reasons.



Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's opposition leader, is hugged by a supporter at a courthouse in Kuala Lumpur

All homosexual activity is illegal in Malaysia, and Mr Anwar faces up to 20 years in prison if he is convicted.

Speaking outside the court room, the former deputy prime minister said his lawyers intended to subpoena Mr Najib and his wife Rosmah Mansor, alleging that they were involved in what he said was a conspiracy to have him imprisoned.

Mr Anwar said the presence in court of diplomatic observers from the US, UK, European Union, Japan and Australia demonstrated the "concern and disgust" aroused internationally by his trial.

Accompanied by two of his daughters and his wife, Mr Anwar said the prosecution was the result of "the machinations of a dirty, corrupt few".

The government insists it is not involved in the trial.

However, the proceedings are seen by many opposition supporters as part of a political fightback by the National Front against Mr Anwar's coalition, which won many more parliamentary seats than expected in elections in 2008.

“The evidence will have to be overwhelming in order to move beyond the perception that Najib Razak is using the judiciary to remove a political rival in a desperate and mistaken move to shore up his own position,” said Bridget Welsh, a Malaysia specialist at Singapore Management University.

The trial was adjourned until Wednesday afternoon after the court dismissed an application by Mr Anwar’s lawyers for a review of a higher court ruling that barred access to some prosecution evidence.

Mr Anwar’s lawyers say they cannot defend their client properly without access to the prosecution’s medical evidence, and that access has been blocked by a series of court rulings.

“One of my hands is tied and I am going into this boxing ring,” Sankara Nair, one of Mr Anwar’s lawyers, said outside the court.

Mr Najib, who became prime minister in April, is struggling to challenge international perceptions that Malaysia is becoming more unstable as a result of political and religious confrontations.

Several churches have been attacked by arsonists recently after a court ruled that the word “Allah” could be used to refer to God by Malay-speaking Christians. In a separate incident, Muslims protesting against a proposed Hindu temple trampled on a cow’s head, sacred to Hindus.

Mr Anwar was convicted of sodomy and corruption after his dismissal as deputy prime minister in 1998, following a political crisis. International observers criticised the fairness of the trial, and the convictions were later overturned, although not until Mr Anwar had spent several years in prison.

A conviction in the current trial would remove Mr Anwar from political life, and could hamstring the opposition. This would clear the way for a recovery by the National Front, led by the dominant United Malays National Organisation, in elections due by 2013.

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