

Anwar bounces back as polls deal stunning rebuke to ruling party

Badawi has ruined UMNO, says Mahathir

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Opposition figurehead Anwar Ibrahim hailed "a new dawn for Malaysia" yesterday after stunning election results that cemented his political comeback after being sacked and jailed a decade ago.

The performance has even revived talk of the charismatic 60-year-old as a future prime minister, after the lost decade that followed his 1998 fall from grace when he was convicted on sex and corruption charges.

Anwar delivered a crushing blow to the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition by rallying the opposition parties to their best performance in Malaysian history, seizing four states and more than a third of parliamentary seats.

He weathered blistering personal attacks during the campaign from Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's ruling party, which was clearly rattled as he criss-crossed the nation delivering barn-storming speeches.

Meanwhile Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi faced mounting calls to quit yesterday after his ruling coalition suffered a humiliating setback in elections seen as a referendum on his leadership.

A visibly exhausted Abdullah conceded there was a question mark over his future after the Barisan Nasional coalition turned in its worst ever results Saturday, losing its two-thirds parliamentary majority and four states.

Asked if the outcome was a vote of no

confidence in his leadership, which has been criticised as weak and ineffective, Abdullah responded: "Maybe. There are a lot of messages from the people."

"There is no pressure at this time," he said when asked if he faced calls for him to resign.

But pressure did come, notably from former premier Mahathir Mohamad, who handed over to Abdullah in 2003 after two decades leading the United National Malays Organisation (UMNO) which dominates the Barisan Nasional coalition.

"My view is he has destroyed UMNO, destroyed the BN (Barisan Nasional) and he has been responsible for this," Mahathir told reporters.

He suggested Abdullah should resign, and admitted he had made a mistake in selecting him as prime minister.

"I think he should accept responsibility for this. He should accept 100 percent responsibility," he said. "I am sorry but I apparently made the wrong choice."

Mahathir has previously said he never intended for Abdullah to serve more than one term, and that he should have opted instead for influential deputy prime minister Najib Razak, who is now leader-in-waiting.

"The problem is we (the government) have become so arrogant," said Mahathir, who has been angered that Abdullah dumped several of his pet projects.

Abdullah won 91 percent of parliamentary seats in the 2004 elections, but analysts said he was being punished this time for high inflation, rising crime and mount-



Former deputy prime minister and opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim (C), flanked by opposition People's Justice Party deputy president Syed Husin Ali (L) and party information chief Tian Chua (R) stand next to each other during a press conference at his residence outside Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

ing ethnic tensions.

He has also faced flak for failing to act on election promises to eradicate corruption.

Political observers said Anwar could

rule the country if he managed to consolidate the successes of the disparate opposi-

tion parties.

"He played a major role in the opposition's success. Anwar remains very influential. He delivered a powerful blow to the ruling party," Mohamad Agus Yusoff from the National University of Malaysia told AFP.

"Anwar has denied the Barisan its two-third majority. He could one day become the prime minister. If the Barisan remains weak, we could see it being toppled in the next polls," he added.

In further victories for Anwar's family, his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail extended her majority in her constituency in the island state of Penang, while his daughter Nurul Izzah Anwar won her first election fight.

Mohamad Agus said the coalition's rhetoric that Anwar was no longer relevant had sowed the seeds for its defeat.

Anwar's long struggle back

Anwar spent six years in jail on sex and corruption charges which he said were politically motivated. The sex charge was quashed but the corruption count still stands, barred him from holding office until April this year.

On April 14, 1999, Anwar was sentenced to six years in prison for corruption and, on August 8, 2000, nine years in prison for sodomy. The sentences were to be served consecutively, and Anwar was given no credit for the six months he spent in jail during the trial. The following year, Anwar's corruption conviction was upheld by Malaysia's Court of Appeal. He was released in 2004.

The Court of Appeal ruled unanimously that year that its previous decision to uphold a High Court ruling that found Anwar guilty was in order, relegating Anwar to the sidelines of Malaysian politics until 14 April 2008.

Gambari continues to pursue Yangon

AFP, Yangon

UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari extended a mission to Myanmar by one day yesterday but appeared to have made little progress in persuading its defiant junta to make concessions on democracy.

Twice during his latest trip the regime has openly rebuffed his diplomatic overtures, casting real doubt on how much his mission can achieve.

UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari yesterday met a group of mid-level ministers in a visit to Myanmar that so far appears to have failed to push the ruling junta into making any concessions on an upcoming vote.

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A government official said earlier that Gambari met the information minister, Brigadier General

Kyaw Hsan, but the UN envoy did not mention the meeting.

Gambari met with Myanmar's information minister, Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan yesterday morning, according to a government official, but junta leader Than Shwe has shown no sign of any willingness for a meeting.

The Nigerian diplomat and UN troubleshooter was granted a rare meeting here Saturday with detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, that was quickly overshadowed when the junta rejected his offer to send foreign observers to a planned constitutional referendum in May designed to pave the way for multi-party elections in 2010.

"His visit has been extended, so he will go back tomorrow. His schedule is always changing," said a government official who did not want to be named, as he was not authorised to speak to the media.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

UN envoy in Myanmar on 'mission impossible'

LARRY JAGAN

The United Nations Special Envoy to Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, is in the country to discuss the military regime's plans for political change. During his trip, Gambari has already met the pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and some representatives of the ethnic minority groups.

During this trip he is pressing the regime to include Aung San Suu Kyi and pro-democracy opposition in the political process, he told The Daily Star by phone.

"I will continue to press the Myanmar government to engage with Aung San Suu Kyi in a substantive dialogue in order to produce a positive outcome that will promote an all-inclusive and transparent process," he said.

Gambari remains upbeat in the face of adversity.

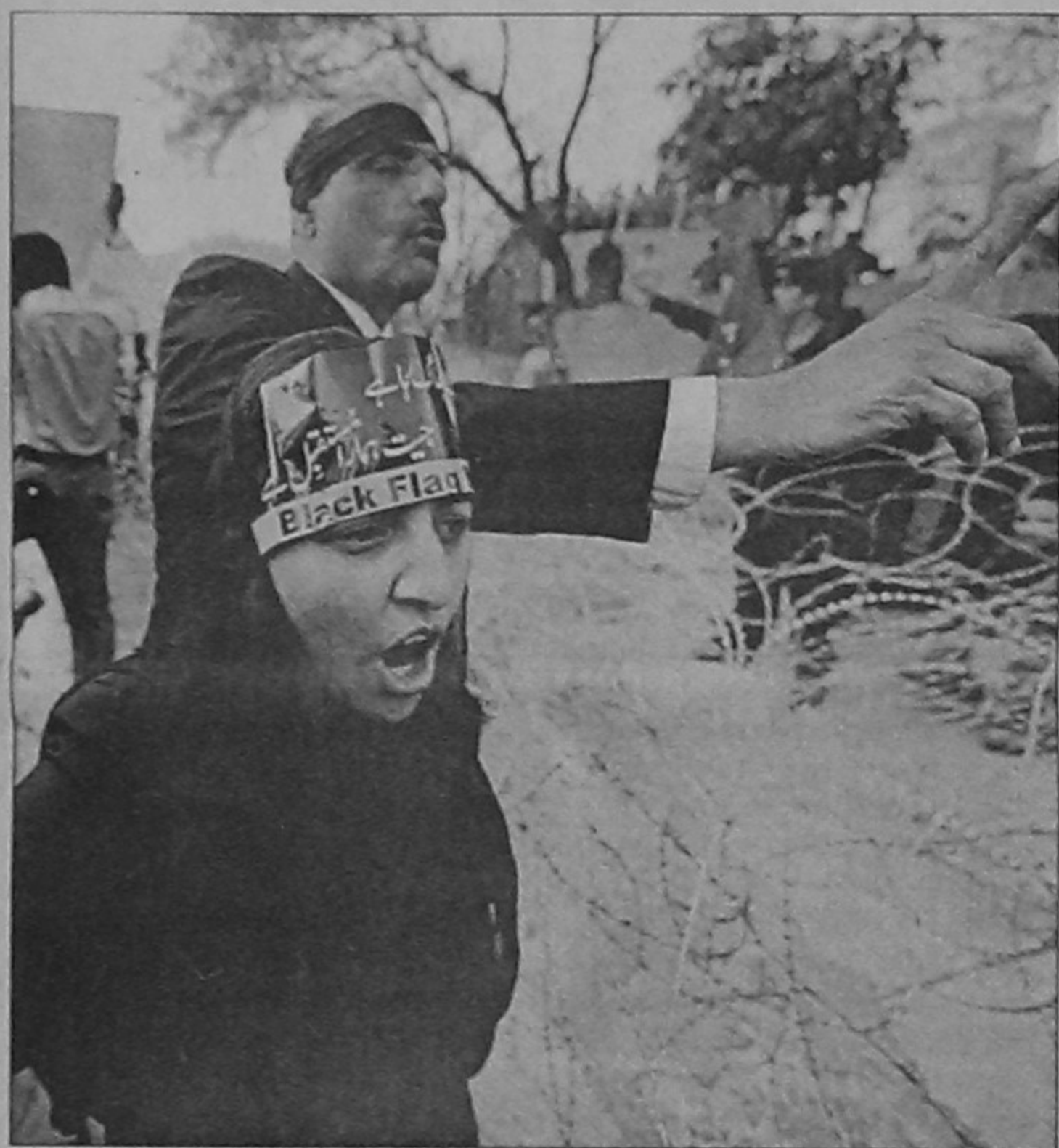
"I will continue my consultations in Myanmar and follow up on a number of recommendations I left with the government during my last trip in November 2007," he told The Daily Star.

The UN envoy is certain to be shown a copy of the new constitution, which so far has been difficult to find.

He knows that he has a tough task ahead of him.

"Sometimes, I myself am frustrated that the tangible results are not faster or we have not achieved more, but we have to build on what we have and continue to press for more results," Gambari told The Daily Star.

While the envoy remains optimistic, the signs from the regime are that Gambari's current trip to Myanmar is almost certainly a final courtesy call.



60 killed over weekend in Sri Lanka

AFP, Colombo

At least 56 Tamil Tiger rebels and four government troops have been killed in heavy fighting across Sri Lanka's embattled north over the weekend, the defence ministry said Sunday.

Helicopter gunships were deployed against suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) strongholds in the coastal district of Mannar on Saturday, the defence ministry said.

It said a total of 56 rebels were killed in clashes on Friday and Saturday when the military made a new push into rebel-held territory in the northwestern coastal area.

There was no immediate word from the Tigers, but the pro-rebel Puthinam.com website said the guerrillas had resisted the military offensive, killing 22 government troops and wounding a further 72. It did not give rebel casualties.

So far this year, the defence ministry has reported that security forces have killed at least 1,957 rebels for the loss of 117 government soldiers.

The government numbers and those given by the Tigers cannot be independently confirmed as Colombo bars journalists and rights groups from frontline areas.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Left parties not happy with Indo-US nuke deal

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The controversial Indo-US nuclear deal has returned to the centre of India's political discourse to once again haunt the relations between India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government and its crucial outside supporter the Left parties.

The standoff between the UPA and the Left parties over the deal appears to have entered the crucial stage after India completed the negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for an India-specific safeguards agreement crucial to implement the deal with the United States, analysts said.

The reason is that this is the final year of the Congress-led government and parliamentary elections are due early next year, they pointed out.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told Parliament that his government was determined to go ahead with the deal and talked about working out a broadest possible consensus within the country on the issue.

"We will seek the broadest possible consensus within the country on the agreement. I believe this cooperation (with the US) is good for our energy security", Singh had said.

However, the Left parties

refused to buy into the Prime Minister's remarks and sought a meeting of the UPA-Left mechanism for discussing the contents of the negotiations with the IAEA.

Last Thursday, CPI(M) General Secretary Prakash Karat shot off a letter to the Prime Minister seeking a meeting of the mechanism before March 15 and the next day CPI General Secretary A B Bardhan too sent a separate letter to Singh threatening that Left parties would withdraw support to his minority government if it went ahead with nuclear deal.

The two letters clearly pushed up the political temperature on the nuclear deal and once again raised questions about the stability of the government and murmurs about a poll ahead of schedule.

However, any sense of a looming crisis over the government was sought to be dispelled by senior Congress leader and External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee when he told a television news channel that he did not foresee early elections and that Left's threat to withdraw support if the government proceeded with the deal was a known position, analysts said.

They said Mukherjee's remarks were aimed at playing down any perception that the forthcoming UPA-Left meeting on the nuclear deal was going to be a make-or-break event in ties between the two sides, according to the analysts.

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