

Printed November 15, 2007 02:17am AEDT

## Anwar ready to take rightful place

Greg Sheridan, Foreign editor | November 15, 2007

**DID you know that Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, very nearly ran for secretary-general of the UN? Although I had known this previously, I found out the detail this week in Indonesia, naturally, which is now in many ways politically the freest society in Southeast Asia.**

I attended a conference of political consultants which was opened by Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, with a magnificent speech in defence of democracy. Two of the other speakers at the conference were Hong Kong's Martin Lee, and Anwar.

When you think of it, this is remarkable. Lee was for many years the leader of Hong Kong's Democrats. He and his colleagues always poll the most votes in elections for Hong Kong's Legislative Council but only hold a minority of seats, because of a peculiar electoral system and Beijing's refusal to grant Hong Kong full democracy even for purely internal matters.

Lee's constant campaigning for democracy, as he believes Hong Kong was promised by China's Deng Xiaoping, and his recent call for the friends of the Chinese to use Beijing's forthcoming hosting of the Olympic Games to press for greater human rights, has made him extremely unpopular with the Chinese Government and its spokespeople in Hong Kong.

Anwar spent several years in jail after a spectacular falling out with the former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Since his release Anwar has become a champion of Asian democracy. He believes the Malaysian Government may call an election before April next year, when his ban for running for parliament expires.

But if the Government does do this, Anwar plans to have 10 opposition politicians nominate on his behalf, with the intention that one will stand down and make way for him to enter parliament via a by-election.

Now, what is remarkable is that the Indonesian President should feel utterly relaxed speaking at a conference with these two fellow democrats, but politicians deeply unpopular with their respective governments.

I don't want to misrepresent the Indonesian President here. He did not share a platform with Anwar or Lee, and he did not publicly endorse either man. Certainly Indonesia pursues good relations with China and

Malaysia.

But I wonder would John Howard, or Kevin Rudd, speak at a conference where Lee and Anwar were speaking and were demanding greater democracy and human rights for their respective societies? I doubt it very much.

The fact that this happens without the blink of an eye in Indonesia is a telling demonstration of just how much and how rapidly Indonesian society has changed, and how quickly the civil society that underpins its democracy is maturing.

The story of Anwar's near candidacy for the UN is fascinating. I must confess to having played a tiny role in it myself, purely as a reporter, but the story was never quite there.

The new Secretary-General of the UN is Ban Ki-moon, a former foreign minister of South Korea.

It was Asia's turn to get the post and Ban was the best-qualified candidate.

But there was always a chance that the Russians or even the French might veto him because he was seen as too close to Washington. But the other Asian candidates were frankly not all that appealing. A number of international heavyweights canvassed an Anwar candidacy.

Anwar is a moderate Muslim, no one could seriously accuse him of being too pro-American, he is charismatic and learned.

Of course, his candidacy would have caused some acute dilemmas.

Malaysia's Government, for example, would have been very unhappy and it would be unusual, to say the least, to have a secretary-general nominated against the wishes of his own national government.

But it was not inconceivable. I believe Al Gore, Madeleine Albright, Richard Holbrooke and other senior US Democrats canvassed the idea very seriously. Although out of office, these people were all immensely influential.

I believe also that the Bush administration's view was that they were supporting Ban, but if Ban's candidacy should fall over they would not necessarily oppose Anwar.

I believe Anwar's old friend, Paul Wolfowitz, was at least aware of these manoeuvrings.

My own tiny role in what turned out to be a non-existent candidacy came about when one of the people most encouraging Anwar asked me if I would interview him simultaneously for The Australian and a big American newspaper. In the interview, Anwar would declare his interest in the job and I would write an evaluation of this. None of this came about because Anwar decided not to do the interview and not to seek the job.

One very perverse consequence of Anwar's wide range of friendships is that there are posters, so Anwar tells me, of Wolfowitz and him together being distributed to Malay villages.

And the accusation against Anwar, which these photographs are meant to support, is that he is pro-Jew.

Wolfowitz is not even identified as a neo-conservative or anything so esoteric as that. Rather it is plain, good, old fashioned anti-Semitism at work.

Anwar meets the accusation head on. Yes indeed Wolfowitz is a friend of his, and an old and good friend. He disagrees with Wolfowitz's policies on Iraq but agrees with him on a number of other issues. And in any event Wolfowitz's Jewishness should have nothing to do with anything.

Anwar's political challenge within Malaysia is very great, in trying to overturn a long established government with a heavy influence on the media. He believes the opposition, running not as a coalition but in broad co-operation with each other, could do well next time. Last time, he says, the opposition got strong support among the majority Malays but almost no support among the minority Chinese and Indians, because the opposition includes PAS, an avowedly Islamic party.

Anwar believes that PAS in government would observe all the constitutional guarantees for all Malaysia's citizens, would be constrained in any event by the other parties in government, and has not behaved badly on communal issues when it has periodically controlled some state governments, although its rhetoric has at times been inflammatory. This claim of PAS moderation is one many other Malaysians would contest with extreme vigour.

Anwar believes he can attract Chinese support next time, especially in his home state of Penang. Anwar's own position on communal and religious issues is more liberal than that of the Malaysian Government, which has in recent years moved to outflank PAS by - to some extent - overtly courting Islamist sentiment.

I don't know if Anwar offers a solution for Malaysia or not. I do know it's enormously interesting to hear him argue his case. And where better to hear it than Indonesia?

---

*Copyright 2007 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).*