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UN group says Malaysia Anwar's jailing politically motivated

By Matthew Pennington

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) – Imprisoned Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was prosecuted for political reasons and should be released, a U.N. body concluded after reviewing the case widely seen as politically motivated. The government rejected the findings and called for the legal process to be respected.

Anwar began serving a five-year jail sentence in February after the country's top court ruled that he sodomized a former male aide in 2008. His case has been seen as intended to eliminate any threats to the ruling coalition, whose popularity has eroded in the last two elections.

The U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found Anwar was denied fair trial and his jailing was politically motivated. It called for his immediate release, according to a letter from the group seen Monday. Its full report is not yet available.

Anwar's daughter, Nurul Izzah Anwar, said she hopes the government will abide by the group's conclusion.

"I am deeply grateful that the United Nations has called for Anwar's release," said Nurul Izzah, a lawmaker. "Its strong stance in solidarity with my father sends a clear and unequivocal message to Prime Minister Najib Razak, and ensures that the sharp decline in human rights under his administration will not go unnoticed."

The government reiterated that Anwar's trial was "a criminal, not a political case" as it was brought against him by a private individual. It also said the final verdict was reached by the courts after an exhaustive and comprehensive legal process over many years.

"It had nothing to do with the government," the prime minister's office said in a statement. "Malaysia has an independent judiciary – with many rulings going against senior government figures – and the government does not have the power or authority to overrule the decisions of the courts."

It urged all parties to respect "the legal process, the judgment of Malaysia's courts and the rights of the victim to seek justice."

The working group is appointed by the U.N. Human Rights Council and its five current members are from Australia, Benin, Mexico, South Korea and Ukraine. The independent body is mandated to consider and render opinions about alleged cases of arbitrary detention.

In the letter, the group also expressed concerns about Anwar's physical and psychological health amid allegations that he is being held in solitary confinement. It said the Malaysian government didn't respond to its queries on the case.

The U.S. State Department on Monday reiterated its "deep concern" that Anwar's detention was apparently politically motivated. Spokeswoman Elizabeth Trudeau said that Secretary of State John Kerry had raised the issue with Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi when he visited Washington in October.

"The decision to prosecute Anwar and his trial have raised serious concerns about the rule of law and the independence of the court," Trudeau told reporters in Washington.

Anwar, who was seen as the most potent political rival to the government, has been jailed twice for sodomy in just over a decade. Homosexuality is a crime in Muslim-majority Malaysia, punishable by up to 20 years in prison and by whipping, although prosecutions are rare.

He previously was imprisoned for six years after being ousted as deputy prime minister in 1998 on earlier charges of sodomizing his former family driver and abusing his power. He was freed in 2004 after the top court quashed that sodomy conviction.

Anwar led his alliance to unprecedented gains in 2008 elections and made further inroads in 2013 polls. The ruling National Front coalition won with a slimmer majority and lost the popular vote to the opposition.