

# Ain't Misbehaving

## Mahathir Draws the Line on Cabinet Misconduct

It was an honor rarely granted and Joseph Chong was one of the chosen few. When the Malaysian businessman ran for parliament in April, no less than Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced his candidacy. Not without hesitation. Chong was fined \$12,377 in Singapore in 1993 for criminal breach of trust. Anyone convicted in Malaysia of an offense that carries a penalty of more than \$777 cannot run for office. Anwar endorsed Chong after Attorney-General Mohtar Abdullah said the prohibition does not apply to crimes committed abroad.

Chong won but his past hounded him. On polling day, he swore crudely at a journalist who asked him about the convictions. "Our law applies to what happened in this country and not in other countries," Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad took pains to point out. "We don't accept that," says Chong's defeated opponent, Sanusi Osman. "Does it mean that you can go outside Malaysia and commit all sorts of crimes, come back, get elected and maybe even become a cabinet minister?"

The barb was well aimed. Before the elections, Anwar stressed that the ruling coalition would not back candidates tainted by "even a suspicion of corruption." In the past year, several high officials have been accused of financial and sexual impropriety. Mahathir moved early in May. In announcing his new cabinet, the PM said rules of conduct were being drafted for senior officials. "There have always been guidelines, but this new code is more specific," says an insider. "Nowadays, you better be cleaner than clean."

The code will set down clear conflict-of-interest rules, define the limits of business involvement and even cover sexual indiscretions. The details are not expected to be made public and only the prime minister can decide what action to take against violators. Some in Malaysia are uncomfortable with the fact that the code will not become law. Still, Mahathir's announcement won broad support. "It's long overdue," says Bar Council head Hendon Mohamed. "Any code that regulates the

conduct of office holders is good."

Several scandals have recently rocked public confidence in government. Last year Rahim Tamby Chik was forced to resign as chief minister of Malacca. The attorney-general decided there were insufficient grounds to prosecute him for an alleged affair with a schoolgirl. But Rahim was charged with corruption in connection with what critics call his "unexplained wealth."



Chan Looi Tat



Chan Looi Tat

**Chong; Rahim: New code of ethics for senior officials**



Frank Bartieri



Chan Looi Tat

**Rafidah; Muhyiddin: "Better be cleaner than clean"**

His passport impounded, the resigned chief minister is scheduled to stand trial in June.

Early this year, International Trade Minister Rafidah Aziz was accused of violating conflict-of-interest guidelines. She was present when a committee in her ministry allocated a large number of stocks to her son-in-law, under a government policy on sharing the country's corporate wealth. Relatives of Mahathir and Anwar were also beneficiaries. The Anti-Corruption Agency is investigating, though Rafidah was reappointed to the cabinet. She will testify in court June 15 in a cheating case involving

share allocations. She is not directly implicated in that suit, but revelations during the initial hearings led to the conflict-of-interest allegations against her.

In Johore state, a church group and a plantation owner separately filed cases accusing Chief Minister Muhyiddin Yassin of involvement in improper land acquisition deals. Muhyiddin stepped down as chief minister to run for parliament last month. He won and was named as expected to the cabinet — but only as Minister of Youth and Sports. Some felt Mahathir's decision to award him a junior post was meant as a message to the PM's appointees about his high expectations on their conduct.

Mahathir can hardly be happy with the furor over Chong, owner of Sabah Shipyard, the country's largest boatbuilder. Observers wonder why Anwar, who zealously guards his Mr. Clean image, is associated at all with the new MP, though many recall how influential the tycoon has been in Sabah. Last year, Anwar led the campaign to regain control of the state. The ruling coalition narrowly lost in state elections but formed the government anyway when rival legislators were wooed over to the coalition camp.

Given Mahathir's focus on ethics, the well-connected Chong is likely to remain on the back benches. Some want him out of parliament altogether. "Chong is not fit to be a representative," says oppositionist Syed Husin Ali. For his part, Syed Ibrahim Rahman, a legal adviser to the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia, wants more openness about the new code of ethics. "The way it is, there can be a whitewash," he argues. Opposition MP Lim Guan Eng urges enactment of the code into law: "Those who transgress know that the worst that can happen to them is that they get the sack. If the PM forgives you, that's the end of it."

The Bar Council's Hendon agrees. "It's dangerous to make this code discretionary," she says. "It could be exercised in a discriminatory way." But Mahathir makes a distinction between criminal acts and unethical conduct. "If a person commits an offense under the law, then we will take legal action," says the prime minister. "If it is against the code, we can terminate his service." In the end, everything hinges on action at the top. Muses Hendon: "There's a Malay saying: the tree doesn't move unless there's a wind." Malaysians are waiting to see how strongly the new wind will blow. ■