

Mahathir refutes conspiracy theory

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theory ^{36/57}

THIS is an excerpt of the press conference by Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad after meeting party divisional heads and state leaders to explain the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from Umno and the Government.

Question: Did the Umno leaders accept your explanation?

Dr Mahathir: It seemed that they (had) accepted because all of them gave me a standing ovation after I made the explanation.

Q: Will there be additional explanation?

A: I hope there is no need for that. Maybe other people will do it. It is not easy for me as I had been travelling round the country.

Q: Datuk Seri Anwar reiterated accusations of a conspiracy against him to destroy his political career?

A: I explained to them why I know there was no conspiracy.

Q: Can you tell us what you told the members?

A: I just explained the events which occurred and how finally I concluded that there was substance to the allegations and was convinced, and I considered that he was not qualified to lead the country, not because of his differences with me over political or economic matters but because his character does not qualify him to become a leader for a country like Malaysia.

Q: Did you disclose any details?

A: No, I did not disclose details but I told them I was convinced, that's all.

Q: What is your hope after explaining to Umno leaders?

A: I hope they are not confused.

Q: Why did you act on the allegations before any investigation was concluded?

A: The investigation is the police investigation. I did my own investigation and I was convinced.

Q: Why did you not disclose the details?

A: Because it is not a pleasant thing to say and I don't like to draw anybody that kind of picture.

Q: With the explanation, do you think there will be Umno members who find it difficult to accept the explanation?

A: I don't know. I see that they accept the explanation. Maybe you have a different assessment. You are

entitled to make a different assessment.

Q: Will Datuk Seri Anwar be arrested?

A: That is not my problem. That is the concern of the law, for those who are responsible for the country's law.

Q: Any possibility of reinstating Datuk Seri Anwar?

A: No, no. Not a hope, I think.

Q: Crowds have been gathering at Anwar's house every night and there are rumours about him being arrested?

A: He in fact seems to be courting arrest and preferably arrest under the ISA (Internal Security Act) so that of course he will be regarded as a martyr and hopefully that will make him look a bit better. Certainly he will get a lot of publicity and of course this Government will be accused of being dictatorial, et cetera, et cetera. We are familiar with this.

Q: Will he (Anwar) be arrested?

A: I don't know. It's not my business.

Q: Can you comment on the reform mentioned by Datuk Seri Anwar?

A: There is no reform. It's only a blind. It's a way of diverting attention from the problems, the reasons for his expulsions.

Q: His charge about this is that there is a political conspiracy, what is your reaction? He said it could not have taken place without your knowledge?

A: I can't say that I don't know but what I know is sufficient to tell me that he's not suitable and I don't think politics comes into the matter, excepting of course that he is no longer considered suitable to be a leader of this country. As far as his belief that it is because he challenges me, I feel that I can defend myself, I feel that I have sufficient support. With regard to my differences with him over the economic management of this country, even if he differs from me, I felt quite sure that I can bring him around to accept my views and my way of doing things and it's normal. That doesn't bother me. But the allegations about the other thing, that we cannot accept, I cannot accept, my party cannot accept, this country cannot accept.

Q: What if the police find that there is nothing against Anwar, does that give him the chance of getting back into Umno?

A: As far as I'm concerned, I'm convinced about this. Unless the police know something I don't know that is so very clear that it proves his innocence, I don't think he is going to come back.

Q: After talking to your divisional leaders today, do you expect them to go on the ground to explain (to the people)?

A: Well, there are still a lot of confused people on the ground and I think that they need to be told about what I spoke on today and I'm sure our people will explain. I'm quite sure that there will be some die-hard who will never be convinced but the majority will eventually be convinced.

Q: Anwar has denied the allegations against him, but when did you start to receive information on his moral misconduct?

A: The moral misconduct has been going on for quite some time but I only knew about it recently. But to deny that, even President (Bill) Clinton denied (allegations against him). Who would ever admit that he is bad, that he does bad things?

Q: After explaining to party members, when will you explain to the Malaysian people at large?

A: I don't think I need to explain to the Malaysian people at large. I think over time they will understand that what I say based on facts. I don't do this to a person who has been literally groomed by me to succeed me, (and who is also) my friend, why should I do this to him? I have lots of enemies. I would like to do that to my enemies. But I don't choose my friends and I don't choose an accusation that is so difficult to explain and so difficult for people to accept. His credentials as a very religious man are very good. I should have found some other excuse but unfortunately there are no other excuses that I got.

Q: Do you ever have re-

grets in grooming Datuk Seri Anwar?

A: "Ever," I don't know but I'm sorry that it has come to this. I was thinking of retiring this year. I went off last year in 1997 to give him a chance to lead the country, and but for this economic problem, I would have stepped down. Unfortunately I think I need to stay back to lend some of my experience for the resolution of this problem.

Q: Will there be a problem in deciding on a replacement (for Anwar)?

A: We will find a way to overcome the problem so that there will be no problem with the party.

Q: There are some Umno leaders at Anwar's house every day. What is your comment?

A: That is their right. To go to any house is not out of bounds.

Q: But some of them said they are going there on their personal capacity?

A: They are going in their personal capacity, I have no problem (with that). But if people do not think that they are there in their personal capacity and they want to form whatever opinion, then they are entitled to it.

Q: What about Anwar's letters dated Aug 25 and 28 to you which are being circulated to the public?

A: I don't know. Letters he gave me, I kept them.

Q: Why did the Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi not attend the meeting today?

A: He was in hospital, he was sick.

Q: Do you think it is right that you have judged him (Anwar) in the court of public opinion and that you might have invited him here to defend himself?

A: He has been given every opportunity to defend himself, unlike others whom he himself had passed judgement on. He was the head of the disciplinary committee and those whom he had disciplined did not get the kind of opportunity he had. As far as this party is con-

cerned, we have pushed aside a lot of people who have eventually been found not guilty, which is what has happened to one or two lenders recently. They did something the party doesn't approve of, they were charged in court, they were found not guilty but they are still not back in the party. This party maintains a certain standard. If we go by some court judgments alone without taking into consideration the perception by the public, then we will be doing something wrong. So we take public perception into consideration when we act as a judge because the court and the person get a no-nonsense attitude. We are in a race now to see who the courts

Q: Do you think this could have been handled a little differently or are you satisfied with the way it is being handled?

A: I'm satisfied with the way I have handled it because I've given him every chance to resign so that these matters would not come to this stage, but he preferred to fight. And he maintains that he's innocent. So now he has to prove that he is innocent.

Q: What was his explanation when you confronted him with the allegations?

A: Lies, lies. They are all lies. There is a whole lot of people conspiring to bring him down. He's almost paranoid about such things. I don't see how we can have senior government officers, courts, judges, prosecutors, a whole lot of ordi-

nary people acting in collusion when these people do not know each other at all.

Q: Since when have you thought that Anwar is not suitable?

A: Only recently.

Q: What about last year?

A: Last year there were accusations (against Anwar). I said it was a lie. It was deliberately done by people who wanted to bring down my deputy. I totally rejected the accusations. I did not even read (the letter). Now with the crystal clear evidence, I cannot reject anymore.

Q: Will you name another deputy?

A: Well, at the time he was top in the party, will settling the problem for me. Q: What should be the moral character of your deputy?

A: I'm not looking for a priest, or something like that. I'm looking for a very ordinary person who acts with propriety, does not do things that are not accepted by the general membership of the party and the public. He cannot do something that will make the party unpopular.

Q: In your discussion with Datuk Seri Anwar, did he admit that he had been involved in moral misconduct?

A: He admitted that he was only human. (He said) he did a little of those things done by normal human beings. But he denied the allegations (made against him).

Q: Did you ask him (Anwar) on what he meant by being a normal human being?

A: No, I did not. I did not

inquire that of him. I was discussing with a person I know, my friend, so I did not ask about it. Because we know that he deliberately portrays the image of a pious person, a man who holds strongly to his religious beliefs, who is also an *imam* (prayer leader) and preaches well. So what he had done is not in accord with such an image.

Q: Was it a very painful decision for you? Which was more painful, the allegation of sexual misconduct or selling information to foreigners?

A: I have stressed that it is the moral issue, not the allegation of selling information or even political economy. The last thing I need at this time when we are trying to manage the country in this economic crisis is to have another political crisis on my hand, but I have no way of avoiding this thing. At a time when this country is playing host to a lot of foreigners coming for the Sukom (Commonwealth Games), at a time when we are facing the economic problems, I don't need another problem on my hand, but this thing has been taken out of my control. So it happened.

Q: Was this the most painful decision you have made?

A: Well I don't really know what kind of pain, I have no means of measuring the degree of pain, but certainly it has been the most unpleasant experience.

Q: Many Umno Youth leaders want Zahid to resign?

A: That is their problem.