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Year-ender (Politics)

1998 MOST TURBULENT IN MALAYSIAN POLITICS

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KUALA LUMPUR: The sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has brought about one of the most turbulent periods in Malaysian politics.

To some, the unfolding drama is a mere power struggle between the top two, marked by illegal street demonstrations in the name of the so-called reform movement by Anwar's supporters demanding that Dr Mahathir to step down.

To others, the ouster of Anwar meant that Dr Mahathir has further consolidated his grip to power, given the solid support of the Umno Supreme Council members, party leaders at various levels and leaders of the Barisan Nasional component parties.

To another group, it meant that there is no more dispute or doubt over the nation's policies and measures to overcome the economic and financial woes now confronting the country. This group sees the urgency and single-mindedness of Dr Mahathir in reversing the misfortune of the country in all his moves, including the sacking of Anwar, rather than merely to cling to power.

However, most if not all of them were concerned that the political upheaval may introduce the unhealthy culture of using street demonstrations or mob rule as a mean to seek changes in politics.

Undeniably, the political developments in Indonesia had in some way influenced local politics, particularly after the student demonstrations ended President Suharto's rule of 32 years rule.

The firing of Anwar from the Cabinet on Sept 2 and his expulsion from Umno a day after, could only add fuel to the tension which climaxed with his arrest under the Internal Security Act (ISA) at his residence in Damansara Heights on Sept 20, after leading an illegal street march with hundreds of supporters through Merdeka Square.

The subsequent sporadic rallies in support of Anwar's reform movement had, in a few instances, turned into riots, forcing the police to take firm action including the firing of teargas and water cannon to disperse the mob-like crowd.

Hundreds were detained and some had been charged in court with several offences in connection with the demonstrations -- all of which seemed to have the desired effect of cooling down the highly-charged atmosphere.

Then came the Anwar's trial on four corruption charges of using his position to deny allegation of his sexual misconduct on Nov 2. The ongoing trial attracted international interest and received wide coverage by the local and foreign media, their interest remaining as high as the day he was sacked from high office.

To several aspiring senior Umno leaders, the removal of Anwar rekindled their hope to make a bid for the party's number two post as the next step to the Deputy Prime Ministership.

The last month of the year also saw Dr Mahathir under pressure by party stalwarts to appoint a deputy, though he had initially said that he was leaving it to the party to elect a new Deputy President in the June party elections before filling up the number two post in cabinet.

The appointment of the deputy prime minister is the prerogative of the Prime Minister and the three possible candidates usually mentioned are the two party Vice Presidents, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Datuk Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, and Umno veteran Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who

had set up the now defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46 when he fell out with Dr Mahathir in the late 1980s.

Another Vice President Tan Sri Muhammad Muhd Taib is currently on leave from party duties to face his corruption trial. He was freed of the charge by the court last Tuesday.

Of late, Dr Mahathir has been saying that he was considering several people for the Deputy Prime Minister's post but has yet to decide on the suitable candidate.

In another development, the speech of the American Vice President, Al Gore, during the Apec Business Summit dinner at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) which supported the reform movement here, received severe criticisms from various communities in Malaysia.

To them, the Gore's remarks were as rude and an interference with the domestic affairs of Malaysia.

Meanwhile, in preparation for the party elections next year, Umno held a special general assembly on Dec 13, and made several amendments to the party constitution.

They included the abolition of the 10 bonus votes for the presidential and deputy presidential candidates from each nomination from any Umno division, while the eligibility for those vying for the Supreme Council was changed.

Eligibility is now based on the percentage of nominations and no more on nominations by at least two divisions as before.

For the candidacy of President, he must receive nominations from at least 30 percent of the total number of the Umno divisions. Deputy President, Vice President and Supreme Council member candidates must receive 25 percent, 10 percent and five percent, respectively.

The amendments also introduced a new provision whereby party members who contested as independent candidates or joined the opposition party in the elections will be sacked from the party and shall not be accepted into the party forever.

In term of the cabinet, five days after the firing of Anwar, who was also the Finance Minister, Dr Mahathir appointed himself as the First Finance Minister, while Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed was named the Second Finance Minister.

Three months earlier, Dr Mahathir re-appointed former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin back to the Cabinet, holding the Special Function portfolio.

Prior to this, Daim who was the Economic Adviser to the government, was appointed as the Executive Director of the National Economic Action Council (NEAC), a public-private sector agency formed in December last year to help overcome the economic crisis in the country.

Daim's appointment was announced together with the appointment of former Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Tan Sri Kasitah Gadam, as Land and Cooperative Development Minister replacing Datuk Osu Haji Sukam, who had resigned and had since been appointed Deputy Chief Minister of Sabah.

The return of Osu to Sabah politics was seen as a move to get the Barisan Nasional to face the state elections, which must be held by March next year.

During his visit to Sabah at the end of last month, Dr Mahathir said that the state election was crucial because it would be the barometer to the future of the Barisan Nasional in the state.

The current Sabah State Assembly will end on March 18 next year and according to the State Constitution, election can be held within 60 days from the date.

In Sarawak, the most prevailing political development was the contest

for the post of Deputy President of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), the backbone party of the ruling state coalition. The contest ended with Sarawak Industrial Development Minister Datuk Abang Johari Tun Openg beating incumbent Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha, who is also the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Another candidate, Sarawak Agriculture and Food Industry Minister Datuk Adenan Satem, who lost in the three-corner fight, was appointed by Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud who is also PBB President, as one of the two Senior Vice Presidents after the PBB Supreme Council amended the party's constitution.

Meanwhile, on the opposition front, except for the DAP, there was not much developments in the other parties.

The DAP expelled its Publicity Secretary Wee Choo Keong and suspended former National Vice Chariman Liew Ah Kim and former National Treasurer Fung Ket Wing for holding meetings condemning the party's national and state leaders.

Pas, DAP and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) also took the opportunity from the current political turmoil by forming the Majlis Gerakan Keadilan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerak), which was joined by 15 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals.

Pas President Datuk Haji Fadzil Noor was appointed Chairman of Gerak, formed to seek justice for the people from the government.

Beside participating in Gerak, Pas has also launched a nation-wide membership registration drive and claimed that many Umno members had joined the party, while quite a number of others were showing interest.

Meanwhile, the wife of Anwar, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail, who is continuing the struggle of her husband, was named protem president of the Pertubuhan Pergerakan Keadilan Sosial (Adil) to fight for social justice in the country but not as a new political party.

The year 1998 only saw one by-election, at the Arau Parliamentary constituency, following the death of its MP Kamaruddin Ahmad on May 25.

In the July 4 by-election, Barisan Nasional experienced a severe blow when its candidate, Ismail Kassim, who is also the younger brother Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim and Arau Division Umno Youth Head, lost to Pas candidate Haji Hashim Jasin.

The economic crisis and the ouster of Anwar were certainly two events that took centre stage for the year, and they can be expected to spill over to the next. -- Bernama

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