

# 'No potential threat in sight to Dr

**Analysis**  
By S.H. Chong

IT WAS two years ago that the Anwar Ibrahim saga began. At the time of the deputy prime minister's fall from grace, Malaysia was in the middle of its worst economic crisis in living memory and the intensely strained relationship between Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar was a political crisis just waiting to boil over.

A lot has changed since then. The economic crisis is over and Umno (the ruling political party led by Dr Mahathir) is back in power after winning the last election late last year with a two-thirds majority. Anwar is in jail, possibly for a total of 15 years unless he successfully appeals his two convictions (on corruption and sodomy), receives a pardon, or has his sentence reduced for good behaviour. Whatever the case, Anwar is no longer a threat to his former mentor.

In short, Dr Mahathir's position as head of government is rock steady and there is no

potential threat in sight. He can continue to implement the economic policies he deems best for the country and can continue to rule as he has done for the past 19 years. The fact that the world has condemned the Anwar trial doesn't bother him a bit.

It does not matter if Richard Boucher, spokesman for the American State Department, had said the United States was "outraged" by the conviction and described Anwar as the "victim of a political conspiracy".

Or that Marie-Christine Lilko, spokeswoman for Canada's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, warned that the erosion of confidence in the rule of law in Malaysia "could also damage the nation's long-term economic prospects".

Or that noted American economist Jeffrey Sachs expressed dismay over the jail sentence during his address at a Central Bank conference in Kuala Lumpur.

Or that the *Japan Times*, an English language daily in a country that normally reveres Dr Mahathir, called the Anwar affair a "sad commentary on Malaysia".

Dr Mahathir probably wears such criti-

cism as a badge of honour. After all, he made his name among countries in the South-South alliance by thumbing his nose at the rest of the world.

But one would have thought that the seemingly critical comments from Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's senior minister and a former arch-rival back in the days when the Lion City was still part of Malaysia, would have ruffled his feathers a little bit. In the past, even a hint of criticism from Lee or any other political leader in Singapore would have caused a firestorm of counter-criticism and outrage from Malaysia.

So why was it that Dr Mahathir failed to respond when Lee told the world press in Kuala Lumpur on Aug 17 that Dr Mahathir had paid a heavy price for his "error of judgment" which resulted in an "unmitigated disaster"?

During the Press conference, Lee revealed several things that the international Press lapped up eagerly. For example, Lee said he had asked Dr Mahathir why he did not set up a commission of inquiry immediately to investigate the black eye that Anwar received while in police custody. He said that although such an inquiry would not have absolved Dr Mahathir from blame, it would have erased the notion that he was party to the beating.

## 'Mahathir's position'

"I'm saying this, I said this before the event, before the trials and tribulations, and the revelations, and I say it even now, I think Dr Mahathir paid a very heavy price, and I feel sorry for him," said Lee.

The world's Press harped on Lee's statements made at the Press conference. Almost all characterised them as criticism. The British Broadcasting Corporation, for example, said "it is rare for Asian leaders to voice public criticism of the way their peers handle internal political issues, but Lee and Dr Mahathir, despite sharing many personal characteristics and views, have a tense personal relationship stretching back many years."

Lee also felt "sorry" for Dr Mahathir two years ago, on the very night Anwar was arrested.

Mr Lee said so during a dinner party cum Press conference at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Singapore to launch his memoirs.

I was there that night and it was clear where the senior minister's sympathies were, Lee said: "I feel more sorry for Mahathir than I do for Anwar."

And it is in this context that one should view Lee's recent statements in Kuala Lumpur.

What many of the foreign Press failed to report was that when Mr Lee was asked

whether Singapore was a friend or an enemy of Malaysia, his answer was: "Singapore is not an enemy; if anything it is a friend."

Most importantly, it should be noted that Lee spoke rather highly of his relationship with Dr Mahathir.

"We can speak quite frankly with each other. We are of the same generation, we've been through similar experiences."

So, Lee's supposed criticism was really no criticism at all, but more of a commentary on how saddened he was by the whole affair.

What is very real, though, is the rest of the world's criticism of Dr Mahathir. There's no misconstruing that.

Steven Gan, the editor of a popular online political journal called *MalaysiaKini* (Malaysia Now), recently wrote a commentary on how badly Dr Mahathir is viewed in the eyes of the world.

"Perhaps Mahathir is better served by travelling more overseas.

"Only by doing so can he get a clearer picture of his home country. And of himself."

True, but as I asked earlier, does he really care? Not at all.