

Anwar Ibrahim's long shadow

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The brutal treatment meted out to the former deputy prime minister stills haunts Malaysian politics

APPOINTING an official human-rights commission seemed a good idea at the time, but when the creature started showing signs of independence, the Malaysian government had to act. It declined to renew the appointment of its most troublesome members and, to be on the safe side, put in a former attorney-general (of all people) as chairman. Small wonder that Malaysia's human-rights NGOs boycotted the commission for much of last year.

The story illustrates a depressing trend

under Dr Mahathir: wherever possible, criticism of the ruling party is choked off at source. Malaysia may be a democracy in broad outline, and opposition parties do win seats in parliament, but only against great handicaps. Freedom of expression has been badly eroded under Dr Mahathir, and critics of the government no longer believe that they can count on either the media or the courts to protect them.

The press is the most obvious example. With the exception only of Myanmar's, it is

the most supine in non-communist Asia. The leading paper, the New Straits Times, is almost as fawning a read as the China Daily, invariably devoting slabs of uncritical coverage to the sayings and doings of Dr Mahathir and now Mr Badawi. Reporters sans Frontières, which works for freedom of the press, last year ranked Malaysia 110th out of 139 countries on that score.

Unwelcome views are squeezed out by a variety of methods. The Star, which once had a reputation for independence, was ▶

closed down for a year in 1987 for criticising a wave of arrests, and has been a shadow of its former self ever since. PAS's party newspaper, *Harakah*, and the DAP's Rocket can be sold only to party members, and *Harakah* has been ordered to distribute only fortnightly, not twice a week. A DAP party newspaper in east Malaysia has been trying in vain to get a licence to print for the rest of the country. Two main Chinese-language dailies, the *China Press* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*, which used to be considered less captive than the Malay-language press, were bought by the Malaysian Chinese Association, part of the ruling coalition, in 2001. And the less said about Malaysian television, the better.

Protest in cyberspace

Only the internet has provided a little relief from the dreary tide, though, sadly, few people have taken advantage of this, with the honorable exception of *Malaysiakini*, a web publication run by the courageous Steven Gan. Their caution was vindicated when in January police seized *Malaysiakini*'s computers after it published a letter criticising the pampering of Malays. The website stayed up, operated from a back-up site, but in skeletal form. The government makes no apology for this kind of behaviour, claiming the right to suppress comment which might disturb Malaysia's delicate racial balancing act.

The opposition cannot even hold rallies, because in July 2001 the government imposed a blanket ban on political gatherings in public places, supposedly in the interest of public order. The opposition says this hurts it far more than UMNO, which can get its message across through the compliant media. Supposedly, indoor gatherings are fine, except that if they are organised by opposition parties, the police sometimes block those too.

By far the most serious cause for concern, though, is the government's misuse of the Internal Security Act (ISA), a draconian piece of legislation enacted shortly after independence. Most of the arrests under the ISA have been of alleged Islamic militants, for which there is currently a degree of international sympathy. But in April 2001, the government put behind bars a group of activists including prominent members of the mainly-Malay opposition group Keadilan, founded in protest at the jailing of Anwar Ibrahim.

UMNO apparatchiks mutter darkly that the "Reformasi Six"—the others have since been released—had been planning to overthrow the state, though the evidence for

this has never been presented. What is certain is that the arrests have deprived Keadilan of some of its most able people. The party once looked like a credible threat to UMNO, appealing to educated, urban voters who were disenchanted with Dr Mahathir's autocratic style. It also offered a counterbalance to PAS, which is predominantly rural. But with many of its leaders in prison, and rallies outlawed, it has been largely neutralised.

At a minimum, human-rights campaigners want safeguards introduced into the workings of the ISA. As things stand, ministers have almost unfettered discretion to hold suspects for an initial 60 days, followed by two more years: when that time is up, a fresh arrest can be made.

What really shocked observers both inside and outside Malaysia, however, was the case of Mr Anwar, the most charismatic young politician of his generation, who was being groomed to succeed Dr Mahathir. The reasons for the falling out are a matter of debate. The Mahathir camp says it was pure impatience on Mr Anwar's part. Mr Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah, who now leads Keadilan, says there were disagreements over how to handle the economic crisis and over Dr Mahathir's lavish spending on his mega-projects. Either way, in September 1998 Mr Anwar was sacked.

Mr Anwar did not go quietly. At the time, South-East Asian politics were running hot: in Indonesia, General Suharto had been driven from power four months earlier by huge street demonstrations. By

calling his supporters on to the streets, and using some of the same slogans, Mr Anwar seemed to be posing a serious threat to the government. It did not come as a great surprise when, on the night of a vast demonstration, Mr Anwar was arrested. Nine days later, he was charged not with public order offences but with sodomy and corruption, witnesses having conveniently come forward years after the alleged events. Mr Anwar was found guilty on both counts. Human-rights campaigners think the trial was farcical. Mr Anwar is now serving consecutive six- and nine-year prison terms. As this survey went to press, Mr Anwar's appeal against the second conviction was, at long last, being heard. Theoretically, he could be released as early as April 14th, though few observers expect that to happen.

The treatment meted out to Mr Anwar still rankles with many. He was badly beaten up in prison, and the police chief responsible was given a sentence of only two months. But September 11th changed a lot: before then, the Bush administration regarded the Anwar issue as an obstacle to the Malaysian prime minister meeting the American president, but in May 2002 Dr Mahathir visited the White House.

Still, the domestic element matters, too. How Mr Badawi deals with Mr Anwar will be seen as an important test of his prime ministership. Whatever happens, it seems certain that Mr Anwar, arguably as brilliant and controversial a figure as Dr Mahathir himself, will be heard from again. ■