

How far can PKR take Altantuya?
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Najib Abdul Razak must be chagrined that the recent Wikileaks brings Altantuya to the fore once again. She cost Barisan Nasional some support on March 8 but not enough to hinder Najib from later successfully assuming the premiership.

PKR has tried to capitalise on the WikiLeaks by urging Singapore to disclose the communication between its Foreign Affairs Ministry and the US State Department. Singapore promptly responded - not to PKR but to Wisma Putra summoning its High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur. The island republic clarified by saying the cables attributed to the senior officials did not tally with its records.

mongolian woman bombed altantuya 081106Nonetheless, the major issues from Altantuya have endured as the conduct of the court proceedings can be seen, even now looking back, to be still as inexplicable as earlier when the trial was in progress. Special Operations Force officers Azilah Hadri and Sirul Azhar Umar - found guilty by the court of Altantuya's murder - simply had no compelling motive to kill a Mongolian stranger.

Compounding the illogic of the verdicts is the fact that the third accused, Abdul Razak Baginda, was acquitted although the first and second accused are both convicted.

Furthermore, Najib ought really to have been called to the witness stand in view of the Unit Tindakan Khas providing the security detail for the Prime Minister and his wife. Razak was additionally a facilitator for defence procurement at the time when Najib was Defence Minister, and Altantuya Shaariibuu supposedly a translator for Malaysian-Russian arms deals.

Yet Najib managed to evade having to testify when public interest was at its height, so what more today when the Altantuya affair has lost most of its traction.

Ship not scuppered

If a scandal the magnitude of Altantuya had blown up in any country that practiced substantive democracy, public pressure would have sunk the government of the day. It didn't happen here.

'The March to Putrajaya' contains six articles by Kim Quek - among the most critical observers of the case - on the topic of Altantuya. Thus it's hardly surprising that the book is banned and its online download version blocked as well.

NONEI had visited three of the biggest KL bookshops to try and get the Kim Quek book but it had already been taken off the shelves. The government is evidently exercising tight control over information flow.

Even if one is willing to go along with the supposition put forward that Najib has never met Altantuya (as per the PM's statement to Parliament in May 2008), the trial in itself was damaging to the government. As if Lingamgate wasn't bad enough and other judiciary crises besides, Altantuya - more than any other trial - plunges public confidence in our justice

system to an all-time low.

The upshot of the protracted Altantuya enigma is that two police personnel were sentenced to the gallows. Azilah and Sirul are not cause celebre eliciting public sympathy but their farcical trial is an insult to our intelligence.

It becomes immensely difficult for the ordinary Joe to place any trust in an administration under which such a travesty occurs.

How inertia envelopes us

Unless a person is blind or stupid, the anomalies of the case hit one smack between the eyes. But it was quite apparent that the street protests over the Altantuya issue were only by the reformasi crowd. The general public tended to shrug off participation. But then again at the end of the day, how many people have stamina for issues beyond the bread and butter?

Public lethargy is ultimately to the benefit of Najib, Umno and BN in maintaining the status quo. I've previously written that Mahathir Mohamad is largely and most responsible for the anomie enervating us. 'Anomie' is an absence of accepted social standards or values due to the breakdown of the state and the institutional infrastructure of civilised society.

kee thuan chyeEditor of the anthology 'March 8: The Day Malaysia woke up' Kee Thuan Chye (left) shared in his interview with the news portal Free Malaysia Today an anecdote about the lack of faith in the system overall, no matter who's in charge.

Kee told FMT how a friend of his who was once a staunch supporter of political change is contemplating reverting to 'the devil we know' in the next general election. "I was very upset," Kee said. "After staying for so long on the track of change, he is giving up because he has lost faith in Pakatan Rakyat's ability to get its act together to govern this country."

Another political commentator Khoo Kay Peng blogged on Tuesday about his friend who is a partner in an established consulting firm taking the hard decision to send his child overseas after he found out about the history textbooks (where five out of the 10 chapters in the Form 4 syllabus are dedicated to Islam and Islamic civilisation).

Khoo wrote that his friend's son is only 14 years old but the father did not want the boy "to be part of a corrupted, politicised and distorted local education system".

Appealing to voter self-interest

The disillusionment experienced by the friends of Kee and Khoo is understandable as it is all too easy to succumb to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness when there is so much rot. Thus Malaysians become characterised by anomie and apathy.

Although we would like to see justice for Altantuya, not many of us possess a sustained emotional investment in her. Unlike Teoh Beng Hock, she is not someone we were acquainted with or had ever heard of before she was killed. While PKR will certainly try to whip up public outrage on her behalf, the issue may not have the staying power they desire as public anger has dissipated over time.

Another approach for the opposition to draw mileage from the Wikileaks, is to instead raise awareness that the Defence Ministry - one of the biggest recipients of the national budget

allocations - is also the country's biggest black hole.

azlanExemplifying the ministry's well-known leakages, the two Scorpene submarines were purchased for RM3.4 billion, a sum that involved a stupendous RM500 million commission to a 'logistics and support' company connected to Razak Baginda.

Former deputy minister of Land and Cooperative Development Dr Tan Kee Kwong revealed in July this year the cost overrun of RM2.3 billion in the contract to build six offshore patrol vehicles (OPVs) awarded to PSC Shipyard Bhd (named in other mentions as PSC Naval Dockyards). The public accounts committee also discovered that RM3.8 billion was paid by the Finance Ministry before one OPV was even delivered to the navy.

Next month, the first armoured personnel carriers (APCs) will be commissioned by the army. We first heard about these vehicles in April when the Defence Ministry was reported to have signed a letter of intent worth RM8 billion with Deftech Sdn Bhd for the purchase of 257 APCs. Already the APCs locally developed by DefTech based on foreign technology are overpriced but another worry is that they may meet the same fate that befell the OPVs.

The most acute problem that confronts Malaysia is corruption and it is this that hurts Malaysians hardest when 38 percent of Malaysian households are poor. Data for the year 2000 enumerated that a total of 1,695,759 households (a family of five is counted as one household unit) or roughly 8.5 million individuals, young and old, lived on a combined income of under RM2,000 a month.

Altantuya indeed offends our moral sensibility but do remember that the greater majority of the population does not have the luxury to ruminate on legal abstractions. It is to PKR's own detriment to be overly focusing on Altantuya (but more energy-sappingly, Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy charge) as election issues while ignoring corruption, inflation, taxation and other pressing concerns.

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