

Wikileaks: Najib and the Altantuya murder
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The US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur closely followed the trial of the accused killers of Mongolian interpreter Altantuya Shaariibuu and frequently discussed whether current Prime Minister Najib Razak was involved in the killing, according to diplomatic cables supplied to Asia Sentinel by the WikiLeaks website.

The diplomats, like much of the public, also speculated that the trial was being deliberately delayed and feared what one cable calls "prosecutorial misconduct" that was being politically manipulated. The embassy officials based their concerns on sources within the prosecution, government and the political opposition.

The cables also draw attention to an intriguing allegation that then Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi may have attempted to use the proceedings to implicate Najib, a claim that was quickly hushed up in the Malaysian press.

Altantuya was murdered in October 2006 by two of Najib's bodyguards, chief inspector Azilah Hadri, 30 and corporal Sirul Azhar Umar, 35, who stood trial and were pronounced guilty in April 2009.

Abdul Razak Baginda, one of Najib's best friends and Altantuya's lover, was accused of participating in the murder but was freed without having to put on a defence.

The murder has been tied closely to the US\$1 billion acquisition of French submarines by the Malaysian Defence Ministry, which Najib headed during the acquisitions. Altantuya reportedly acted as a translator on the transaction, which netted Razak Baginda's company a 114 million euros (RM534.8 million) "commission" on the purchase.

Reportedly she had been offered US\$500,000 for her part in translating. After she was jilted, she vainly demanded payment. A letter she had written was made public after her death saying she regretted attempting to "blackmail" Razak Baginda.

French lawyers are investigating whether some of the 114 million euros was kicked back to French or Malaysian politicians. Despite the scandal, the US government has not publicly backed away from Najib.

In April 2010, Najib visited the White House and was praised by President Barack Obama for the Parliament's passage of an act allowing Malaysian authorities to take action against individuals and entities engaged in proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The cables are replete with accounts of a long series of meetings with opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, who repeatedly told the Americans that Najib was connected to corrupt practices in the acquisition of the submarines as well as the purchase of Sukhoi Su-MCM-30 Flanker fighter jets from Russia. Anwar also called attention to Najib's connection to the Altantuya case.

Prosecution ineptitude by design?

A Jan 24, 2007 cable, marked 'secret', wrote that "Perceived irregularities on the part of prosecutors and the court, and the alleged destruction of some evidence, suggested to many that the case was subject to strong political pressure intended to protect Najib."

In a Feb 1, 2008 cable, embassy's political section chief Mark D Clark wrote that a deputy prosecutor had told him "there was almost no chance of winning guilty verdicts in the on-going trial of defendants Razak Baginda (left), a close advisor to Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak, and two police officers. She described the trial as interminably long." (That, of course, turned out to be wrong. Sirul (below, right) and Azilah (below, left) were ultimately convicted and have appealed their sentence).

Clark called the trial a "a prosecutorial embarrassment from its inception, leading many to speculate that the ineptitude was by design. On the eve of the trial, attorney-general Abdul Gani Patail dropped his lead prosecutors and replaced them with less experienced attorneys.

Similarly, a lead counsel for one of the defendants abruptly resigned before the trial 'because of (political) attempts to interfere with a defence he had proposed, in particular to protect an unnamed third party.'

The protracted nature of the case, Clark continued, led "at least one regional newspaper to speculate that 'the case is being deliberately delayed to drive it from public view'. Malaysia's daily newspapers rarely mention the case's latest developments, and it is unprecedented in Malaysian judicial history that a murder trial could drag on for seven months and still not give the defence an opportunity to present its case.

"Such an environment has led many to conclude that the case was too politically sensitive to yield a verdict before the anticipated general elections."

A January 2007 cable called attention to Razak Baginda's affidavit confirming that he sought the help of Musa Safri, later identified by reporters as Najib's aide-de-camp, in ridding him of the jilted woman, and in other cables pointed out that Musa had never been called for questioning.

In another cable, dated May 16, 2007, Wan Ahmad Farid Wan Salleh, a then aide to former prime minister Ahmad Abdullah Badawi, told US Embassy officials that he was "certain that government prosecutors would limit their trial activities to the murder itself and the three defendants; prosecutors would not follow up on allegations of related corruption or other suspects."

In a Jan 27, 2007 cable, marked 'Secret', embassy officials wrote that "In December we heard from one of (Anwar's) lawyers that Razak Baginda's wife was in contact with Anwar and Wan Azizah, suggesting one possible source for Anwar's information."

Razak Baginda's wife (right), during one of his first appearances in court, screamed that her husband "doesn't want to be prime minister." That was taken by observers as a reference to the fact that Najib reportedly had been having an affair with Altantuya, but passed her on to Razak Baginda because it would be unseemly to have a mistress when he succeeded Abdullah as premier. Najib has offered to swear on the Quran that he had never met the woman.

However, in July 2008, P Balasubramaniam, a former police officer and private detective who had been hired by Razak Baginda to protect him from Altantuya, filed a sworn statement saying he had been told by the accused man that Najib not only knew the murdered woman but had an affair with her and introduced her to him.

In a telephone interview on May 9, Anwar, however, told Asia Sentinel that Razak Baginda's wife was not the source of his knowledge of Najib's connection and that instead he had been told of the connection by Setev Shaariibuu (seated right in photo), Altantuya's father, who said he had wished to present evidence of Najib's involvement, but was not allowed to do so. Multiple attempts to contact Setev by Asia Sentinel have been unsuccessful.

Almost immediately after he made the statement, Balasubramaniam was picked up and driven to a police station, where he was forced to withdraw the statement and write a new one saying Razak Baginda had told him nothing of the sort. Balasubramaniam fled Malaysia for India.

He later said Najib's brother, Nizam, and wife, Rosmah Mansor, had met with him and that he was offered RM5 million to forget his statement connecting Najib to Altantuya.

Balasubramaniam displayed a flock of checks drawn on the account of an associate of Najib's wife. The former private detective has made a series of statements from outside the country about Najib's

involvement.

'You can die, Pak Lah'

A February 2008 cable from political section chief Clark gives a hint that Abdullah Badawi himself may have been trying to get rid of Najib by forcing Razak Baginda to implicate him in the murder.

"In the latest turn of the ongoing Altantuya murder trial, accused political insider Abdul Razak Baginda, who has remained calm and composed through most of the proceedings, unleashed an emotional tirade shortly after the Feb 20 noon recess on the trial's 90th day," Clark wrote.

"Referring to the prime minister by his nick-name 'Pak Lah', Razak reportedly exclaimed: 'You can die, Pak Lah! (in Malaysian - Matilah kau, Pak Lah!) I'm innocent!' according to unpublished journalist accounts.

Last day of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Najib Abdul Razak takes over as prime minister in Putrajaya"Local newspapers and the government news service Bernama reported the fact of the outburst, but did not print Razak's statements. The short-lived exception was the English language newspaper The Sun, which included the quotations from Razak in its early morning Feb 21 edition.

"Sources at newspaper confirmed to us in confidence that the Ministry of Internal Security compelled The Sun to withdraw and recall thousands of copies of their first run paper in which the original quote was included. Prime Minister Abdullah serves concurrently as Minister of Internal Security."

During the trial, Clark wrote, Razak Baginda, "appeared uneasy throughout the morning session of court on Feb 20. Razak's father, Abdullah Malim Baginda, had whispered something to him shortly before the trial had begun for the morning and apparently upset the accused.

Razak had remained quiet throughout the morning hearings, but just after the noon recess was called and as he was leaving the courtroom he kicked and banged the door and yelled, 'You can die, Pak Lah! Die, Pak Lah! I am innocent. I am innocent.' He was later seen crying before his lawyer while his mother attempted to comfort him.

"Speculation is rife in Malaysia's online community concerning what it was that set off Razak Baginda outburst, including conspiracy theories alleging the Prime Minister's Office had urged Razak to implicate Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak ... in return for sparing Razak a guilty verdict and its mandatory death sentence," officials wrote.

The cable goes on to write, "Regardless, the Internal Security Ministry would want to limit any possibly inflammatory reference to the prime minister at the trial, and particularly at this juncture due to the proximity of Malaysia's general election to be held on March 8. Any connection between the prime minister and the murder trial would be scandalous.

"The GOM (government of Malaysia) reportedly has worked hard to 'drive (the case) from public view' ... and is not about to allow the case to influence the coming elections."

- Asia Sentinel