

## **Anwar: Phantom voter conduit or crossover king?**

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Will Anwar Ibrahim be caught in the mesh of responsibility for the problem of illegal migrants being given citizenship and voting rights in Sabah?

This is a question that has arisen in the wake of the empowerment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry on the problem.

Speculation had begun to swirl about a possible Anwar role in the creation of the problem immediately after Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak announced last Saturday the names of members tapped for the RCI and its terms of reference.

Although Anwar had issued a disclaimer sometime ago - he contended that he was out of the loop - it did nothing to still the speculative mills.

These started churning partly because it was felt that Najib would not have taken an obviously Umno-destructive step like setting in train an inquiry that is almost certain to call attention to the party's role in the gerrymandering of constituencies in Sabah, grist for which came from the presence of illegal migrants with citizenship papers in the state.

The issue has become such a political hot potato that no party in Sabah can afford to be against the setting up of a RCI.

And no politician in Malaysia can avoid the public's odium if the RCI infers he or she was responsible for the presence of dubious voters on the electoral rolls.

Three massive rallies, each with a progressively larger and more multiracial turnout, staged by polls reform group Bersih in the last five years testify to the validity of the assertion that electoral sorcery is as appalling a crime in the eyes of an awakened electorate as stealing from the public till.

Najib yielded to the irresistible

Najib was merely yielding to the irresistible by setting up the RCI, and though the terms of reference do not require the commission to point fingers at who is culpable, it is inevitable that it will make inferences and that would be enough to arraign the implicated.

Umno central and Umno Sabah are going to be hurt by this move of Najib's, ostensibly taken to forestall more defections from the presently roiling BN coalition that rules Sabah.

Could a move that in the longer distance would damage Umno provide short-order success to the party's prime current priority - tarring its nemesis Anwar Ibrahim with every crime in the book and some out of it?

This effort would succeed, where other demolition jobs have abjectly failed, if it can be shown that Anwar had a role in the campaign to legalise the illegals in Sabah.

The prospects for success of this effort are not auspicious.

Anwar played a role in the crossovers of PBS's elected representatives after the Sabah state election of 1994. The crossovers to Sabah Umno ended PBS rule of the state (1985-94).

Anwar was in cahoots with that carpetbagger S'ng Chee Hua who arranged the wherewithal for the scuttling of the PBS government, thereby incurring the lasting aversion of Joseph Pairin Kitingan (left), the then and current PBS leader and the Hogian Sou (paramount leader) of the KadazanDusunMurut community.

It is Pairin's support for the government of Chief Minister Musa Aman that is credited for shoring up the tenuous control the Sabah Umno chief exerts on the creaking state BN coalition he leads.

It was defections from that shaky coalition that forced Najib into a rearguard action that saw the empowering of the RCI, a move that is ultimately more menacing to former PM Dr Mahathir Mohamad than it is to his one-time deputy, Anwar Ibrahim.

Anwar was a shoo-in for the post of deputy president of Umno after incumbent Ghafar Baba withdrew from defending the post in December 1993.

Early the following year, Anwar was made Sabah Umno liaison chief, a post that was Ghafar Baba's prior to his withdrawal from the post of deputy prime minister and deputy president of Umno days before his humiliation at the party's elective triennial assembly in December 1993.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a prominent photo of Ghafar Baba in newspapers in Sabah, earlier in 1993, ought to help the Royal Commission of Inquiry in its scrutiny of dubiously obtained citizenships in the state.

The picture shows a broadly smiling Ghafar together with an Election Commission official while looking at a huge map of Sabah with the EC's proposed redelineation of constituencies, an exercise that is undertaken early in each decade.

That exercise, completed in 1993 and scheduled to be tabled (and inevitably approved) by the federal legislature in 1994, was prorogued by incumbent CM Pairin's decision to call snap polls in Sabah in March 1994 to forestall the shamelessly redelineated constituencies from being used in the state election.

The gerrymandering had added 12 new constituencies, all Muslim-majority ones, to the then existing 48-seat state assembly.

There was not one seat added to the total of 20 that had a KadazanDusunMurut majority and the five seats that had a Chinese majority. So much for the independence and impartiality of the EC!

Only the Muslim majority seats were increased by the addition of 12 new seats composed of an electorate whose citizenship had been fast-tracked.

The conspicuous smile on the late Ghafar Baba's face as he gazed on the map of the proposed redelineated constituencies that appeared in practically every newspaper in Sabah in 1993 was telling about what was going on.

The smorgasbord of policies, events and actions that led to the legitimization of Sabah's illegal migrants predated and then eddied around the emergence of Anwar Ibrahim as Sabah Umno chief in 1994, but it did not inveigle him into collaboration or connivance.

He played a role very like what he's doing now - an abettor of crossovers, but not an illicit conduit for parliamentary sorcery based on shameless gerrymandering.

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