

## **The gyrations of Dr M in Sabah RCI**

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COMMENT Dr Mahathir Mohamad's turn before the royal commission of inquiry on illegal residents in Sabah has come and gone.

He breezed in and breezed out yesterday, leaving the public gasping over whether it saw a phantasm or a witness to what happened on his 22-year watch as premier to people coming through Sabah's porous borders.

Part of the reason for the bewilderment was that Mahathir chose to take what has come to be called the Vernon Jordan version of the Fifth Amendment.

This US constitutional rule, versions of which exist in other jurisdictions, affords witnesses protection against self-incrimination.

Lawyer Jordan gave this rule its stoutest overlay.

A close friend of President Bill Clinton, Jordan was supposed to have given this advice to White House intern Monica Lewinsky at the height of the sex scandal in 1998 involving her and the president: "Your answer is, 'It didn't happen, it wasn't me.'"

Before the RCI in Kota Kinabalu yesterday, Mahathir displayed haughty disdain for anything or anybody that could plausibly connect him to 'Project IC', the campaign which saw thousands of people from southern Philippines and Indonesia come to settle in Sabah from the 1970s onwards and obtained citizenship.

The waves of illegal immigrants coming through to settle in Sabah were said to have increased during the period of Pairin Kitingan's tenure as chief minister (1986-1995), particularly after the withdrawal of his party, PBS, from the BN just before the 1990 general election. This was during the span (1981-2002) when Mahathir was BN chief and PM.

Mahathir had described PBS's eleventh-hour withdrawal before the October 1990 polls as a "stab in the back", but yesterday before the RCI he made it seem that all linkages between him and the goings-on in Sabah were as distant as volcanic movements on Mars.

The Lingam amnesia

One was apt to compare his performance yesterday to that he gave in January 2008 before another royal commission of inquiry into the VK Lingam videotape which allegedly showed a senior lawyer engaging in acts of case- and judge-fixing.

Mahathir was PM during the period when the lawyer was videotaped as having engaged in judicial tampering.

In testimony before that inquiry, Mahathir trotted out such convenient locutions as "I can't remember" or "I don't recall" when pressed for answers to questions that plausibly connected him to judicial appointment matters that fell under his purview as PM.

lingam tape inquiry day 4 170108 mahathirHis pleas of a lack of a retentive memory were lame, only in comparison to his pre-inquiry bravado, issued through his counsel before he was called up, that he was willing to testify not only on matters within the RCI's terms of reference but also on matters outside of it - a prior assertion of confidence in his truth-telling aimed at preempting doubts about his credibility.

In the event, under testy questioning, when pleading a lack of recall about matters that fell under his purview, the contrast between pre-testimony bravado and his witness-stand equivocations were too stark to escape satirical comment.

Thus went up the cry "Mahathir mudah lupa" (Mahathir too forgets easily), a wry twist to his rhetorical lament against what he claimed was the Malays' amnesia about the government's good deeds to them.

No knowledge

Mahathir's testimony before the Sabah RCI will not lend itself as easily to satiric comment as did his before the Lingam videotape inquiry simply because before his performance yesterday, he had consistently maintained that he had nothing to do with 'Project IC'.

He adhered to that defence of no prior knowledge, with Vernon Jordan-like resoluteness.

His testimony requires the public to believe that something on the scale and duration of the effort that saw scores of thousands of illegals granted citizenship in Sabah occurred without him as PM knowing about it.

Memory lapses are par for the course among humans, but the notion of Mahathir asleep over something as big as what happened in Sabah during his time as PM is inherently incredible.

Now the public has to wait for Anwar Ibrahim's testimony which should come soon.

Officers of the Sabah RCI had come to Kuala Lumpur to interview the opposition leader about his role in 'Project IC'.

Anwar through his counsel has notified that he is willing to testify; that he had no part in the project; that he was out of the loop, but that he knew of three people who had responsibility for it.

By now observers have had an inkling of who the three are so that when and if Anwar discloses their identities and they turn out to be as conjectured, the public should brace for another round of recrimination between the principal dramatis personae of our long-running national drama that started 15 years ago this month.

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