

## **Dr M's sly twists before Anwar's turn in Sabah RCI**

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**By Terence Netto**

COMMENT Dr Mahathir Mohamad has problems leaving bad enough alone.

It was bad enough when he earlier this week told the ongoing Sabah royal commission of inquiry that he did not know anything about illegal residents being given citizenship on dubious grounds.

Perhaps sensing that the disclaimer was incredible even by the low standards of his perception of public gullibility, he must have felt he should retrieve matters somewhat the next day.

NONE Instead, he made things worse through shunting responsibility for the issue onto Anwar Ibrahim whose turn on the witness stand comes next Thursday.

On his nemesis' possible responsibility for the Sabah illegal residents' issue, Mahathir blurted: "He was in the government. He knew the government's responsibility. If that was the government's policy, why didn't he stop it?"

The question inevitably arises: Could anyone baulk Mahathir in the 22-years he was prime minister of Malaysia?

If a practice of legitimising Sabah's illegal residents had become policy, could a subordinate during Mahathir's prime ministerial tenure rein in the action and reverse the policy?

Could someone have done anything at all to halt and overturn a wrong action or wrong policy during Mahathir's watch?

Interestingly, under sworn testimony in the initial round of Anwar's trials for corruption and sodomy in the late 1990s, an Anti-Corruption Agency chief told the court that Mahathir wanted to know from him if it was Anwar who told him to raid the offices of head of the economic planning unit in the PM's Department.

NONE Shafee Yahaya's (left) ACA men had found RM100,000 in cash in the drawers of Ali Abul Hassan's desk. After the find, a furious Mahathir demanded to know from Shafee if deputy premier Anwar had prompted the raid.

Shafee testified in court that he went on to reject Mahathir's insinuation that Shafee

had tried to fix Ali.

"It's a big sin to fix anybody," was Shafee's plainspoken response to Mahathir's testy inquiries.

This episode showed that Mahathir does not view people as moral agents but as wards of scheming superiors.

Preempting the fallout

Some people's behaviour is prompted by their religious precepts; others by their instinct for survival. Most people's conduct is prompted by a combination of motives, stemming from their morals, goals and interests.

On Sept 19, the public will get an inkling of the particular mix of motives behind Anwar's stance on the issue of Sabah's illegal residents when he testifies before the RCI.

Anwar's adversaries do not absolve him of responsibility for the Sabah illegal residents' issue. They claim he had a strong motive to be compliant in the whole imbroglio.

NONEMaking the Muslim illegal residents into citizens meant more vote-empowered supporters for Umno to whose presidency he aspired, with Sabah's 20 and more Umno divisions a big pool from which to garner votes for a shy at the party's top post.

Anwar whetted the public's appetite for his appearance before the RCI by allowing his counsel to reveal that he will not only reiterate what he has long maintained - that he was outside the decision-making loop on the issue; more intriguingly, his counsel disclosed, Anwar will tell the inquiry he knew of three people who were critical to the project's implementation.

Mahathir's outburst about Anwar's hypothetical responsibility may have been prompted by a desire to preempt the fallout from any disclosure that would include him among the three people Anwar will finger at the inquiry.

It's never his fault

Mahathir's pugnacious character means that his accusatory fingers are pointed at others, especially when it is his turn in the crosshairs.

When the journalist Barry Wain revealed in his book, 'Malaysian Maverick', that something like RM100 billion was squandered during Mahathir's tenure as PM, the former PM's reply was characteristic: he said that RM150 billion and more was wasted during the brief reign of his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Mahathir while under attack tends not to try to seek a way out through any possibility that the sprawl of the decision-making process allows the person at the pivot to claim attenuation from responsibility and hence some mitigation of culpability.

He reckons people are gulls anyway and their inherent attention deficit disorder means involved explanations are a waste of time.

It would help if Anwar is as elaborately explanatory before the RCI next week when he appears before it.

Sept 19 is a day before the 15th anniversary of the famous black eye incident he endured on the night he was detained under the Internal Security Act in 1998.

In characteristic style, Mahathir, in an attempt to deflect widespread anger over the incident, attributed Anwar's black eye to self-flagellation.

He did not recant after it became clear that the injury was inflicted by the then-inspector-general of police Rahim Noor.

Before the Sabah RCI, Anwar can show he is more precise when it comes to blame-fixing and fault-attribution on matters of not just grave, but of treasonous import.

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