

**Ex-PM Mahathir sounds like a broken record**  
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COMMENT The Kajang by-election has triggered a crapshoot.

With something like three weeks to go to nomination day, the campaign is already awash in the hogwash that tells you the silly season's here - earlier than usual.

By now we well know that any contest in which the stakes are high and PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim is involved tends to attract mad hatters, like moths to flame.

It's not that Anwar is a contributor to the crap; it's just that he's so unfailing a cause for the emission of the drivel that tells you the madding season has begun.

Presently, the most prolific peddler of poppycock is former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Even at an age that is supposed to bring on a mellow equanimity, the scent of Anwar can be counted on to make the octogenarian Mahathir's nostrils twitch, like a tapir's when browsing for food.

As gleefully as a hog after truffles, the former prime minister the past few weeks has dug up every unthinking cliché about Anwar for regurgitation without aid of the rhetorical contrivances that can render the jaded the gleam of wit.

Anwar, the agent of America; Anwar, the sly dodger of court action; Anwar, the PM-aspirant who's barely MB material; Anwar, the sexual deviant but pretender to Islamic rectitude; Anwar, the justice exponent but hidden repressor of liberty; Anwar, the apparent meritocrat but latent promoter of nepotism; Anwar, the bogus financial czar and tool of the IMF and World Bank; Anwar, the public Islamist but covert Jew lover, and so on and so forth.

The range of these defamations must want to make Anwar say with the poet Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I'm large, I contain multitudes."

But the only multitudes that matter these days are the ones that turn up for his stumps on the election circuit.

From Permatang Pauh to Pasir Gudang, from Kajang to Kota Kinabalu, the attendances at the opposition leader's ceramah have not receded. And this is what appears to give his adversaries sleeplessness.

Anwar's decision to go for a seat in the Selangor legislature has given his ally turned adversary Mahathir the insomnia that can cause memory loss.

Echoing Liow

Last week, Mahathir, taking the cue from MCA president Liow Tiong Lai, blamed Anwar for Operation Lallang.

Operation Lallang, launched in October 1987, involved the detention of over 100 politicians and social activists and the banning of several newspapers in what has come to be regarded as one of the darkest chapters of Malaysian history.

Anwar was education minister at the time while Mahathir was both prime minister and home affairs minister.

Mahathir has previously tried to dodge responsibility for that episode by claiming that it was the police who had insisted on the repression, conveniently forgetting that the Internal Security Act only allowed for detentions under the signature of the home minister.

If Mahathir's disclaimer of responsibility is taken at face value, then it meant that at the time of ISA arrests, Malaysia was a police state, not a parliamentary democracy.

With regards to Operation Lallang, Anwar's links extended only to the fact that his ministry was responsible for the placement of non-Mandarin speaking personnel in government-aided Chinese schools.

The decision led to protest demonstrations by Chinese educationists. Umno Youth responded with a menacing display of chauvinism. Tensions ran high and the government reacted with a spate of detentions and newspaper bans.

Last week, newly-elected MCA chief Liow, in his first foray into Kajang, which seat is likely to be contested by his party, reminded Chinese voters that it was Anwar's actions that had led to Operation Lallang.

Mahathir, 88, promptly seconded Liow's view until Anwar countered by saying that he was in charge of the education portfolio and not home affairs under whose imprimatur the ISA arrests occurred.

Under pressure from DAP adviser Lim Kit Siang, who was the opposition leader in 1987 and who tartly reminded Mahathir that he had signed the detentions orders as home minister, the ex-PM admitted responsibility, citing advanced age for his memory lapses.

However, a retentive memory for old canards was at work when Mahathir, pressing the attack against Anwar, trotted out all the hoary old charges against his nemesis, from western tool to latent sexual predator.

He sounded like a stuck record, spinning endlessly in the grooves of a discredited past.

This is what gives Mahathir and his ilk goose pimples: while their target, Anwar, is taken up with what to do about the future, they are reflexively fixated on the past.

That is why, for the latter, the Kajang by-election is a crapshoot while for their adversary it is the signpost to a better future - for Selangorians, at least.