

Dr M wields his scalpel closer to the jugular

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By Terence Netto

COMMENT It is the closest thing to an outright declaration of hostilities - the latest broadside Dr Mahathir Mohamad has unleashed at Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

After months of sniping at the incumbent PM, chiefly on the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) shenanigans, the former PM today broadened his attack to include the Altantuya Shaariibuu murder case.

The broadening of the attack to include the unresolved issue of why the murder took place ratchets up by several notches the pressure on Najib to clear up the mystery.

Hitherto, Mahathir had not brought up the murder of the Mongolian damsel in his attacks on Najib, confining himself to the reigning PM's handling - or rather mishandling - of the economy and what he felt was Najib's neglect of Malay interests and truckling to Chinese ones as reasons why he is unsuitable to continue to lead Umno.

Altantuya and why she died were not matters that could be said to be grounds for Najib to either give forthright answers that dispel suspicions of involvement or impliedly be held culpable.

After all, Umno presidents-cum-PMs enjoy a low burden of proof; so long as Najib could plausibly explain that he was nowhere near the crime, although individuals close to him were on its periphery, he was safely out of the zone of culpability.

This gave him enough distance deflect the shards that since the murder took place in October 2006 periodically sprayed in his direction as disclosures from the late private investigator P Balasubramaniam and now the convicted murderer Sirul Azhar Umar threatened to pierce Najib's defensive perimeter.

Driblets from Balasubramaniam (below), in particular, were salacious but when the private eye dramatically renounced them in July 2008, within 24 hours of making them, and disappeared from the face of the country, the low burden of proof enjoyed by an Umno luminary interposed to save the then-deputy prime minister from the fallout.

But like Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's Macbeth, the Altantuya murder would not go away.

And when the news that one of the convicted murderers of the Mongolian woman, Sirul, has slipped out of the country before the apex court overturned his acquittal by the Court of Appeal, it was obvious that mystery of Altantuya's murder wasn't going to be interred.

Today, Mahathir's bringing up the subject by urging an investigation of Sirul's claim, voiced

from the temporary haven he has obtained in death penalty-averse Australia, confirms that the ghost of Altantuya has not been exorcised.

An act of desperation?

Using the Altantuya murder mystery to flush Najib out from his defensive perimeter is in some way is an act of desperation by Mahathir (below).

He must have felt that the ongoing exposures of the extent of the 1MDB fiasco, the sovereign wealth fund whose overseer is the PM, would be enough to force Najib from office.

But the PM has got Umno and the rest of BN firmly on his side, which effectively removes any threat that a palace coup would take place and that Umno and BN would have a new man at the stern simply because of the failure of the incumbent to stanch the haemorrhage from the 1MDB fiasco which now menaces the finances of the country.

But Najib has control of the panoply of government of the country, the office of Umno president and prime minister having accumulated a whole range of powers from the time Mahathir was PM in the early 1980s.

This extensive accumulation has insulated the holder of the office not only against relentless attacks by the opposition but also from insurgencies within his fort.

Perhaps only an attacker who has had a big hand in building the fortifications knows how best to breach its ramparts.

It must be déjà vu to trot out that old saw about living in interesting times which is code for Malaysian politics being perpetually intriguing.

Which is why that other bit about reality being more fantastic than fiction should see some service as an alternative description of the goings-on in Malaysian politics if only because nobody could make up stories such as we are about to see unveiled.

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