

## Highlights of 2016 and what to expect in 2017

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This has been a year of the unexpected, with rampant political realignments fuelled by allegations of corruption and misappropriation of funds from the beleaguered state fund 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB).

Singapore has **convicted** three bankers in 1MDB-related cases in the past two months while the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) initiated a **civil action suit** in July seeking the forfeiture of assets they claimed were stolen from 1MDB.

However, University of Tasmania's Asia Institute director James Chin pointed out that Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak was never mentioned by name in any of these cases.

"Since 2015, the (1MDB) scandal came out and people were saying he is on borrowed time, but he managed to survive the whole year.

"(So) the most significant political event (this year) is the fact that Najib stayed in power," Chin said to *Malaysiakini*.

Despite this, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) senior lecturer Ahmad Atory Hussain believes that leadership problems concerning Najib had been the most significant political development in the country.

"His position in Umno is unquestionable but what about among the people?" asked Atory.

Mustafa Ishak, who heads the political, security and international affairs cluster of the National Council of Professors, agreed with this.

"He (Najib) has full control of Umno; I don't think there will be threats from within Umno. But when it comes to the people at large, this is something that makes a difference.

"There are people who support him, who don't and those who just stay quiet, waiting for the moment to just cast their votes. And we don't know how big this group is," said Mustafa.

As such, Atory said it is quite difficult to say with full certainty whether Najib's position will be further fortified or otherwise.

Acknowledging Najib's hold on power, Atory however pointed to the results of people's power in other countries.

"Now it's 'Najib's power', eventually, people's power will come out," he said.

Meanwhile, Chin opined that another major political event this year was the concurrent sacking of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) stalwarts Muhyiddin Yassin and Mukhriz Mahathir as Umno deputy president and Kedah menteri besar respectively.

A concurrent double sacking of this magnitude has never happened in Malaysian history, Chin said.

“He (Muhyiddin) did not really commit a political crime, all he did was question 1MDB in the cabinet and Najib didn’t like it.

“What is really surprising is that nobody defended him,” he said.

### **Dr M’s olive branch to foes**

On the other hand, Mustafa is of the opinion that former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s extension of the olive branch to his once political nemeses, PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim and DAP supremo Lim Kit Siang and working together with them to bring down the BN government has been the most significant occurrence in 2016.

“Mahathir coming to court, shaking hands with Anwar was something that really shocked a lot of people.”

Pointing out how Mahathir had been enemies with both Anwar and Lim for decades, this, as well as Mahathir’s decision to go against Umno, have definitely been significant instances that had taken place in the country, said Mustafa.

Being in disagreement with the prime minister, added Mustafa, was something quite normal, citing Mahathir’s unhappiness with Najib’s predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

“He just left Umno but didn’t go beyond that. This time, he again left Umno but formed a new party.

“It is something that not many people could have imagined would have happened; it is beyond our political imagination.”

And another major difference then and now is how Mahathir has gone all out against the party that made him the prime minister, Mustafa pointed out.

“Forming a new party is something big, something that might change the political landscape, given how he still has some influence and appeal on the people.”

Chin, meanwhile, pointed out how Mahathir effectively became the de facto opposition leader when he aligned himself with the opposition, due to his standing as one of the country’s most senior political leaders.

And this was only made possible because Anwar lost his final appeal on his Sodomy II case, Chin said.

If Anwar had won the appeal and was freed, then maybe Bersatu would not exist, he added.

“(Anwar losing the appeal) led indirectly to Mahathir assuming the effective leadership of the opposition.”

Not only that, the loss of Anwar’s appeal had even led to the opposition considering for the first time that they need to have someone other than Anwar as a candidate for prime minister.

### **What can be expected in 2017?**

With all these occurrences, what, then, can be expected in 2017?

Mustafa believes that with the somewhat clear indication that the general election will be held in 2017, it would therefore be the year of the political battle.

“I don’t know whether it is going to be the mother of all battles or not, it’s yet to be seen.

“(But) the next election is crucial in order to determine whether Umno and BN can still remain in power.”

The Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) vice-chancellor however expressed concern on the country’s silent voters.

“No one knows their position and people are quite tired of politics. Maybe they have decided and want to make the big decision when the time comes.

“We don’t know whether people are still willing to listen to explanations or whether they have decided on whom to vote for.”

The million-dollar question, therefore, is the extent of issues such as 1MDB in changing the minds of the Malays in particular, as well as the youths, said Mustafa.

Atory, however, firmly believes that Umno will be tested in the next general election.

“Their position will be greatly dependent on the people’s choice.

“Umno is not a dominant party anymore. I can’t say that it is the end of Umno but people keep thinking about the end of Umno now,” he said.

Pointing to the large-scale defections in Umno, this, said Atory, had never occurred before.

“Not only Umno, but PAS is also facing defections.

“This year has been very tragic - a political tragedy,” he quipped.

And so it all boils down to whether the people will choose BN or the opposition coalition, Atory added.

“They have partly decided (on whom to vote for). If there is positive change in Umno and leaders are replaced, people might reconsider.”

However, Chin disagreed, saying that the elections are merely a “sideshow”. Chin predicts that BN will win without any issues due to a divided opposition.

What will be more important next year, he said, is the value of the ringgit.

If the ringgit hits RM5 or RM5.50 against the US dollar, it will create major political waves, he said.

“That for me is more important than the elections because you are talking about people's livelihood.

“If the ringgit hits the fan at RM5 against the US dollar, it will have major political repercussions, it means it will drive everybody who wanted to give Umno a chance to no longer give them a chance,” he said.

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