

What Taib Mahmud can't buy
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Steven Gan

It is when you're near death that the vultures begin to circle above. Powerful politicians at the tail end of their careers understand this well.

Abdul Taib Mahmud may be a strongman in Sarawak, but he knows he will have to call it quits one day. At 71, and having been in power for 26 long years, that day is drawing near.

No wonder Taib is beginning to see haunting shadows everywhere. Otherwise he wouldn't be spooked by an innocuous report on allegations that he and his family were linked to a timber kickbacks scandal.

After all, this is not the first time he has been accused of corruption. In the old days, he would have ignored them and they would've died a natural death. But those pre-Internet days are gone.

That he sues an Umno newspaper, Utusan Malaysia, is also perhaps his way of warning Putrajaya not to - as in ex-premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad's words - 'kacau' (disturb) him.

But there's another reason for the lawsuit. It is a clever ploy to bar everyone, in particular the fledgling opposition in the Sarawak state assembly, from discussing the matter.

When the state assembly convened on May 14 - the first of such sittings this year - Taib took the unusual step of making a 10-page personal statement to deny his involvement in the scandal.

The speaker of the assembly refused to entertain any questions on the matter after Taib's speech.

The next day, the assembly speaker announced that Taib had already filed writs of summons in the High Court against malaysiakini, Utusan Malaysia and two opposition leaders, and as such any discussion would now be considered sub judice during the eight-day sitting.

Thus, the matter is permanently closed until the case goes court - a process which could take years.

From rags to riches

While Taib is king of the hill in his neck of the woods, he knows that the Sarawak chief minister serves at the pleasure of Putrajaya - they're the ones who really call the shots.

His uncle, Abdul Rahman Yakub, quit as chief minister in 1981 after he fell out of favour with federal leaders. Taib, who was then a rising star and serving a stint in the federal cabinet, was sent back to Kuching to take charge.

Rahman took up the ceremonial post of governor but intended to pull the political strings from his new office. Not surprisingly, there was soon bad blood between the veteran politician and his protegee Taib.

Six years later, Rahman engineered an attempted palace coup dubbed as the Ming Court Affair - named after the Kuala Lumpur hotel where the plotters had their secret meeting.

Rahman thought he had the upper hand over his nephew when more than half of the state assemblypersons pledged allegiance to him and vowed to move a vote of no confidence against Taib.


But Taib survived when then premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the real kingmaker, made it clear that he was standing by the incumbent. The coup fizzled out.

Abdul Taib Mahmud

Aged 71, married to Laila. Two sons and two daughters.

1961	Law graduate from Australia's Adelaide University.
1962 - 67	State minister (serves in various portfolios including communications and forestry)
1968 - 81	Federal minister (various portfolios including primary industries, defence and federal territory)
1981 -	Took over as Sarawak chief minister from his uncle, Abdul Rahman Yaakub. Currently in his seventh term as CM. He has been in the post for 26 years, making him the country's longest-serving state leader.

Azlan Zamhari / Malaysiakini



The family feud, in a nutshell, was about access to Sarawak's rich natural resources - timber, oil and land.

At the height of the war of words between the duo, Taib accused Rahman of giving away a whopping 1.25 million hectares of logging concessions worth RM22.5 billion to his family and cronies in his 11 years at the helm.

But having terminated the concessions disbursed by his uncle, Taib himself awarded an even bigger portion of the state's resources to his own family and his set of cronies - 1.6 million hectares in total, or about the size of 26 Singapores.

The ensuing wholesale logging is arguably the most systematic destruction of the world's oldest rainforest. Faced with criticism, then state environment minister James Wong pooh-poohed the idea that deforestation could lead to global warming. The climate change, he said, would be ideal for playing golf.

And as the great forests of Sarawak dwindled in the 1990s, Taib's family moved on to other lucrative businesses by snapping up, among others, the once state-owned company, Cahya

Mata Sarawak (CMS).

This conglomerate controls much of what goes on in Sarawak through its monopoly of cement, steel, timber, construction, financial services and banking.

Anyone who wants to do serious business in Sarawak may most probably have to deal with CMS or any one of its scores of subsidiaries. The company is cash rich too - two months ago, it sold its controlling stake in the debt-laden RHB bank to pension fund EPF for RM2.25 billion.

Among those holding key posts in CMS are Taib's Australian-born wife Laila, sons Sulaiman and Mahmud Abu Bekir, and brother Onn Mahmud.

Plenty for ACA to probe

The Anti-Corruption Agency, in the wake of the timber kickbacks scandal, has dusted off its files on Taib. We understand that the agency is not limiting its probe to the scandal alone. If that's the case, they have plenty to investigate.

Surely one place to start is the alleged abuse of power and conflict of interests, among others, in the award of government contracts to CMS. There were other allegations too.

Take the case of Wisma Sanyan - Sarawak's tallest building. Located in a city not known to be in dire need of office space, the 28-storey tower in Sibu was built by a company linked to Taib's brother, Tufail Mahmud.

Tufail did not fail. Indeed, the project was a guaranteed winner despite an office glut in Sibu. After it was built, state government agencies promptly took up eight floors of the tower block.

A similar complaint had been lodged against neighbouring Sabah chief minister Musa Aman over the Wisma Bandaraya scandal. It's the same story, only that Wisma Sanyan is - like everything else in Sarawak - 10 times bigger.

The question on everybody's lips is how Taib, who was so poor that his early schooling was sponsored by his estranged uncle, now has an accumulated family wealth of at least RM2 billion?

The powers-that-be are fond of throwing the challenge of 'show the evidence' to those making allegations of corruption. Prove it, they say. Clearly Taib's lawsuit against Malaysiakini is an opportunity for us to do just that.

As one of the richest politicians in the country, Taib can afford to hire the best lawyers to fight his case. Malaysiakini will not be able to match his legal firepower. But we have truth on our side. And that's something surely money cannot buy.

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