

Najib, Anwar battle for international credentials
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Since becoming prime minister, Najib Razak has faced serious challenges at home in trying to rebuild the image of his ruling BN coalition amidst the schisms and controversies that have afflicted the three main coalition parties.

His task of strengthening and revitalising his coalition has been made much more precarious by the political pressure he has been subjected to by the Anwar Ibrahim-led opposition.

najib pc in parliamnet on altantuya murder case allegations 030708While trying to keep up his political momentum at home, Najib has been trying to also juggle the task of rebuilding his image on the international stage, especially vis-à-vis that of Anwar, who continues to enjoy the international image of both a moderate Muslim and an opposition figure who has been grievously wronged by two trials regarded overseas as trumped up in the attempt to drive him from politics or worse.

And if recent events are any indication, as in the domestic controversies that have off-and-on gripped Najib's government, Anwar is not likely to cede much ground on the international stage either.

Anwar's international reputation and credibility, particularly in the West, were cemented during his days as finance minister much of the 1990s, which culminated in his falling-out with the former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Back then he quickly came to embody the image - at least among those sympathetic to the so-called Washington consensus - of a moderate with a learned appreciation of the intricacies of maneuvering through an international financial crisis.

NONEBetween his release from prison in 2004 and winning his current parliamentary seat, Anwar Ibrahim reaffirmed his ties and visibility abroad. Perhaps this was to be expected given he was forbidden by Malaysian law from immediately jumping back into the political fray and running for office.

The period coincided with lecturing stints at Georgetown and Johns Hopkins Universities in the US and Oxford University in the UK, not to mention that they took him to familiar locales (especially Washington, DC) and among some friendly circles.

It was also during this period that Najib's star within Umno was on the ascendency. By the time the 2008 general election rolled around in March, then-prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was already mired in a serious internal political struggle within Umno and the political assault from Mahathir did not help Abdullah's attempts to move Umno and the country beyond the politically crippling grip of the former premier, who rarely passed up an opportunity to indulge in Washington-bashing; or for that matter, being his prickly self toward the West. To be sure, most of this sentiment was tailor-made for domestic political consumption.

As the handwriting on the wall for Abdullah became apparent following BN's meek performance in the 2008 general election, Najib, the prime minister-in-waiting, also found himself in the dubious position of being propped up by his political mentor and anti-Washington demagogue, Mahathir.

Already having been embroiled - and internationally tarnished - by allegations over the

gruesome murder of Mongolian translator Altantuya Shaaribuu in 2006 by two of his bodyguards and by allegations of corruption over the purchase of French submarines, Najib's close political links to Mahathir may have helped consolidate his political stake within Umno, but it would be safe to say it hardly helped to make Najib a sweetheart in either Washington or other western capitals.

International notoriety

In an effort to improve his overseas image and to seek to blunt Anwar's, Najib even before he took office had the government contract with the international public relations powerhouse Apco at a cost of RM28 million. That has backfired to some extent through Anwar's allegations that Apco also does work for the Israeli government.

NONEIt is against this backdrop that there was much hullabaloo made in the state-controlled media of Najib's 'Kodak moment' during his meeting with US President Barack Obama during the nuclear security summit in Washington, DC in April.

While it symbolised Najib's stepping out on his own on the international stage – and out of the shadow of his anti-western political mentor – it arguably enabled the prime minister to appear, after all, less a novice, at least vis-à-vis Anwar, especially in Washington.

NONEPiggy-backing on this encounter with Obama, the prime minister's wife, Rosmah Mansor, too was the beneficiary of some apparent international notoriety as she was honoured with the International Peace and Harmony Award. Given some of the critical coverage that the prime minister's wife had attracted in the alternative media, such international exposure for the couple – at least on the home front – helped provide a favourable narrative internationally.

For his part Anwar, having become embroiled in another sodomy trial, has been diligent about helping to keep some of the international community's attention on Najib's government by stressing the issue of political persecution in Malaysia. This is evident in how his legal team has sought to portray the sodomy case.

Beyond this, Anwar has continued to cultivate his international links. Just as the hoopla from Najib's trip to the United States was winding down, Anwar was featured at the Oslo Freedom Forum in late April. More recently, he renewed old and enduring ties with associates in the United States during a visit centred around a presentation on Islam and democracy in Southeast Asia delivered at the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, DC.

Anwar will continue to rely on his international reputation and image as a credible democrat – and a moderate, internationally renowned Muslim figure to sustain his domestic political ambitions.

It is, incidentally, also in this light that we can interpret Anwar's recent 'regret', as reported in a Washington Post article, for invoking the reference of 'Zionist aggression' in his characterisation of the flotilla incident off the coast of Gaza. Surely, Anwar must have realised that he had stepped just a bit too far and can ill-afford to compromise his credentials in the international community as a moderate.

Just as Anwar sees the inherent value of his international goodwill both for himself and for the prospects for democratic reforms in Malaysia, Najib has also revealed his intentions by retreating from the anti-Washington rhetoric that was his political mentor's signature and

simultaneously repair his own international image, whilst hoping to lessen the overwhelming advantage and goodwill Anwar continues to enjoy in the West.

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