

Another smear campaign, another face of PAS
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The "Anwar factor", as it has come to be known, has sprung back like a rubber ball kept under pressure for a long time.

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Four years ago, Anwar was almost a spent force in Malaysian politics. When he was released after a court's acquittal in September 2004, there was still no guarantee that another attack against him would not resurface, despite Dr Mahathir Mohamad's failed campaign to taint his character.

It is no wonder that some labeled the judgment which led to his acquittal as "poisonous". The judges' opinion that a homosexual act had taken place was intended to leave an indelible taint of doubt and suspicion to curb any repetition of his previous rise to power.

The script behind the latest allegation of sodomy is familiar for those who followed events in the late 90s. This time, with some loosening of the government's grip on the mainstream media as well as the evolution of the Internet into a mainstream media in its own right, there may be a limit to misinformation and abuse of the country's institutions.

Because of this, international sympathy for Anwar may not be as crucially needed as ten years ago, but it has kept the police on its toes. While many Muslim figures have come to Anwar's defence, not all the support for Anwar necessarily works in his favour either, such as the statement of concern from Washington, as well as from some of his old friends in western governments and institutions.

It is interesting to note the timing of the latest campaign to get Anwar: when he repeatedly threatens to engineer a mass defection of BN MPs by the middle of next month.

More importantly, it follows a revelation that secret meetings have been held between some PAS and Umno leaders to undermine the opposition coalition by offering important posts to PAS.

The series of secret meetings, which are no secret to those who rely on coffeeshop talk and blogs instead of official ceramahs held at stadiums, follow a softening of stance by Umno leaders vis-a-vis PAS in order to extract the latter from the opposition.

The muzakarah (dialogue) or any other Arabic terminology used to describe a secret meeting, is ostensibly for the good of Malays and Islam. This is based on the thinking that the Malays have lost their political power to non-Malays, largely due to Umno as a Malays-only entity succumbing to the coalition of PAS, DAP and PKR last March.

A deal, if reached, may see PAS leaders, especially those who joined the secret meetings, occupying important positions of power at state and federal levels, a feat which the party may not be able to achieve even at the peak of Umno's crisis, such as was shown in 1999 during a period of intense political crisis.

Ustaz Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, PAS's murshidul-am, has indirectly criticised the deputy president, Nasharuddin Isa, and a number of other PAS leaders for being duped into Umno's

political trap. Instead, Nik Aziz posed a rhetorical challenge: that Umno dissolve itself, PAS follow suit, and both unite as a new party based on Islam to lead people from all religions and races in the country.

Umno has strongly opposed PAS's Islamic ideology for decades in the name of multi-racialism. Why is Umno only now extending an olive branch to PAS? When the Malays-only Umno depended almost entirely on non-Malay votes to come to power, such as in 1999, there was then no attempt at any unity talks with PAS in order to strengthen Malay-Muslim support for the government.

Dangerous racial dichotomy

It is highly probable that the latest allegation against Anwar is also part of a plan to woo the anti-Anwar bloc within PAS. Such moral vilification has been a favourite game to cast doubts on anyone with some Islamic credibility.

The late leader of the 1979 Islamic revolution of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, was also not spared by the Shah regime who had tried to cast doubts on his personal morality. Even Anwar's Islamic charisma, which is only a cosmetic asset as far as Islamic credibility is concerned, can invite such a campaign.

There are some in PAS who appear to have their conviction of Anwar's innocence shaken because he is resisting giving his DNA. They forget that the last time it was taken, Anwar's DNA was splashed on a mattress as court evidence of illicit sex and that 'evidence' was later expunged from court testimonies after a forensic expert was forced to admit in court that he had been coached by the police.

Even with all these blunders, it is unfortunate that doubts have been created in the minds of some PAS leaders about the truth (or rather the lack of it) of the sodomy allegation, allowing themselves to be used as pawns by Umno.

It will be a disaster if the Islamic laws of hudud and qisas, which have strict rules of evidence before casting suspicion on a person, let alone convicting or punishing that person, are administered by such people who can be swayed by a police report.

The secret negotiations, if successful, could have resulted in a dangerous racial dichotomy: a government made up entirely of Malay Muslims (Umno and PAS), and an opposition dominated by non-Muslims. This will be a potential racial time-bomb which could further destabilise the country's already volatile racial political scene.

This should never be a means of any organisation wanting to project Islam's image in a multiracial society, especially when some mode of power-sharing has been touted since independence as Malaysia's recipe for racial harmony.

PAS stereotypes shattered

One thing which has skipped many observers is that the talks have dismantled some stereotypical myths about the traditional PAS ulama, especially Nik Aziz, who represents the party's 'conservative' leadership and is often attacked as 'backward' by politicians of both sides.

Now, it seems the turbaned leader of PAS is more committed to multiracial governance, not to instant political power, which could spell disaster in the long run, than the so-called new 'professional' breed of non-ulama in suits who shot into PAS leadership in 2005, wanting to 'rebrand' PAS's image of Islam in the electoral market.

Having said that, the secret negotiation episode serves as a warning, particularly to a small group of opposition politicians who have an aversion to anything Muslim, from syariah to Arabic roadsigns for tourists. For this alone, PAS should not be blamed for keeping its contact with Umno open. Democratic politics is, after all, notorious for its non-permanent enemies and temporary friends.

On the other hand, it has also posed the question of whether PAS's ultimate goal for a greater role for Islam can be achieved by aligning with another political party that has no shortage of secular baggage. In other words, should it survive by moving from one strange bedfellow to another? Or should it look into its current methodology and ask itself why it has failed to empower Islamic ideals even from a position of power?

If its experience in the last few months of sharing power with its allies has not jolted it into finding other ways instead of democratic elections to function more effectively, PAS is on its way to repeating yet again the usual mistakes of Islamic movements around the world.

For Anwar, the episode is a mild reminder that defections can be a double-edged weapon. The only success of the current vile campaign against him is keeping him busy fighting to clear his name.

The 60-something politician may now not have the great stamina he had in 1998. But public contempt of such dirty politics remains, and this is not only attributed to a tainted judiciary working hand in hand with the police. For now, fighting it out outside of prison may prove to be easier, especially when this time around, there is more unfinished business than a decade ago, in case he is to be locked away again.

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