

Pak Lah's sunset - a blazing sky or dim eclipse?
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Anwar Ibrahim may have failed to assume the premiership on the very day of Sept 16, but he has certainly brought the nation to a cross-roads that may mark the most important turning point in the nation's history.

Within days from now, the nation may know its fate – whether it will be a future that is nothing more than the status quo of racial fragmentation and corrupt rule or a bold new frontier that promises national unity and vigorous growth.

The week ending Sept 20 is indeed a week of high political dramas. On one side, an aspiring prime minister-in-waiting is relentlessly seeking to take over power with his supposed parliamentary majority; while on the other, the incumbent prime minister looks set to succumb to party pressure to relinquish his post to his deputy.

Anwar promptly and swiftly made his moves on Sept 16 and the following days. On Tuesday 16th, he announced that he had already secured the support of the majority of members of Parliament and requested to meet Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi (Pak Lah) to ensure a peaceful transition of power.

Pak Lah rejected the request on the same day, calling Anwar's claim a "mirage". Failing to secure a meeting, Anwar then requested on Thursday 18th that an emergency session of Parliament be convened not later than Tuesday 23rd to debate a motion of no confidence. Again Pak Lah rejected the request on the same day.

After these two rejections, Anwar appears to be embarking on the third course, which is an audience with the King to establish evidence of Anwar's majority support, thereby seeking a royal intervention.

This may result in the King calling for an emergency parliamentary session to settle the issue of who actually commands the confidence of the majority in Parliament; or he may choose to ask for the change-over of government to take place – resignation of Abdullah and his cabinet, followed by appointment of Anwar and his cabinet – if His Majesty is fully satisfied of Anwar's majority support, and if so requested.

But of course, Pak Lah could always pre-empt such a royal intervention by promptly exercising his privilege as prime minister to call Parliament into session to debate the issue.

Pak Lah cornered

Meanwhile, in the Umno Supreme Council meeting on Sept 18, under forceful presentations by council members, Abdullah must have silently admitted to himself that he had lost the confidence of the party hierarchy.

The remaining question is whether he will step down in the coming party election in December or before Oct 9 as requested by his dissidents. Oct 9 is the first day of the month-long period during which Umno divisions will hold their annual meetings and nominate candidates for the party leadership.

Ostensibly, Oct 9 was suggested to avoid the embarrassment of Abdullah failing to receive his nominations for presidency, but in reality, it is to give enough time for his deputy Najib Abdul Razak to take such measures as necessary to face off potential challenges from Pakatan Rakyat with its supposed majority as claimed by Anwar, when Parliament resumes its seating from October 13.

There is no doubt that Abdullah is facing perhaps the most momentous decisions of his political life – not just about when he will resign, but also about what he will do between now and the day he steps down.

Now that he is free of the burden to fortify himself with repressive measures in order to prolong his political life, he should now reflect on his long-cherished ambition to reform our dilapidated institutions of state and restore some shine to our faded democracy.

Granted that he may not have the time or the clout to institute these reforms now, he could at least with his awesome power as the prime minister provide a benevolent shield to enable the on-going democratic process to proceed without unlawful sabotage from any quarter.

If it is shown that Anwar does not have the majority, well and good, the people should thenceforth be satisfied with Barisan Nasional's legitimacy to rule and extend their co-operation accordingly.

parliament opening day 130306 mpsHowever, if Anwar has successfully established his majority, whether through a vote in Dewan Rakyat or through other legitimate demonstration of free choice of members of Parliament, then Pak Lah and his cabinet should resign to pave the way for a change of government in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution.

What the nation is most concerned with at this moment is whether Barisan Nasional will unleash a repressive dragnet to thwart such a constitutional transition, as it has been prone to such indulgence in the past.

The latest example was the recent wanton arrests of innocent civilians using the draconian Internal Security Act, though the Act was only meant to be used against armed insurgency.

And even Anwar appeared to be threatened by such ISA arrest when Pak Lah on Sept 17 suddenly called Anwar a threat to national economy and security, with such threat only eased the next day when Pak Lah said he had no intention of making any ISA arrest during his press conference after the fateful Umno Supreme Council meeting where he was pressured to quit.

Crowning achievement?

Will Pak Lah behave like a democratic gentleman in his lingering days of power and allow the constitution to take its natural course which may see Anwar coming into power, or will he condone laws and institutions to be abused to frustrate the constitutional process?

In this respect, it is pertinent to recall that Pak Lah played a positive role on two important turning points in the democratization process of the country. The first was when he allowed the court to act without political interference that resulted in the freeing of Anwar on 2nd

Sept 2004.

The next was his graceful acceptance of the stunning set back suffered by Barisan Nasional in the general election of Mar 8, 2008. These events could not conceivably have occurred under the repressive rule of former autocrat Mahathir Mohamed.

In view of Pak Lah's expressed intentions to carry out reforms in the past and his propensity towards more liberal rule, he may yet preside over, as premier, the third and perhaps the final turning point towards complete democratization by safeguarding the constitution from being violated by unscrupulous politicians.

If he does that, his final days as premier may yet be moments of his crowning achievement – a fair-minded prime minister who courageously stands by his pledge to 'preserve, protect and defend the constitution' at the crucial moment of transition of power, thus becoming instrumental in ushering a new era of reconstruction and rejuvenation from the current decrepit state of the country.

BN beyond salvation

Yes, the nation badly needs a complete overhaul, and the Umno-led Barisan Nasional has already reached a dead end with no hope of salvation.

Former de-facto law minister Zaid Ibrahim, who was recruited by Pak Lah after the March election to specifically spearhead the much promised reforms, recently quit the cabinet in sheer despair of his colleagues' dogmatic adherence to racist ideology and recalcitrance in perpetuating corrupt governance. He said:

"I faced a brick wall! I can't translate or make them understand the basic thing that we are a country that is fair to all races, we have the same rights under the federal constitution. ..".

Zaid, who used to own the largest legal firm in the country and is regarded by many as the only honest soul in UMNO, said:

"I truly feel that the institutions of government, the courts, the police and the judiciary need a major overhaul.....a major clean-up".

"(They are) not ready for a process-driven system, not ready for meritocracy, not ready for greater levels of accountability and a truly independent judiciary. They would like to cling on the leverages of power based on discretion and privileges."

Zaid lamented his efforts to bring reforms and restoration of rule of law had only earned him widespread scorn from his party and cabinet colleagues for being "not a true fighter for my own race and religion".

These words of Zaid only confirm public knowledge that since the punishing March election, Umno instead of learning the lesson, has instead crawled deeper into its cocoon of racism and corruption.

And leaders of satellite racial parties like MCA, MIC, Gerakan seem to be collectively suffering from mass denial syndrome when they claim that they can get Umno to shed its racial hegemony and recoup the lost support from their respective communal groups.

It is far better for these politicians to bravely face the truth now and move according to what is best for themselves and their electorate, than to be rudely woken on the day of next election when they will find their parties completely obliterated by electorate that have long abandoned them.

Najib not free from scandals

With regards to the imminent passing of baton from Pak Lah to his deputy Najib, one cannot help but be alarmed by such a move.

This is due to the dark clouds that have gathered over Najib's head arising from his alleged link to the Altantuya murder has not been cleared. The court might have sat for one year over this case, but the fact remains that the three accused who were close to and who worked for Najib do not appear to have adequate motive to kill the girl.

And yet no one has explained to date why Najib and his aide-de-camp Musa Safri (who was an important link in the events that lead to the murder) have been completely left out in the police investigation and the subsequent court hearings.

Even more damaging to Najib is the explosive affidavit by private investigator P Balasubramaniam (Bala) which was announced in a press conference on Jul 4, 2008.

In this affidavit, Bala gave intimate details revealing publicly for the first time the alleged triangle of Najib-Altantuya-Razak (the third accused) – directly contradicting Najib's oft-repeated vow that he neither met nor knew the girl.

Bala also claimed that during the 7-day interrogations by police, he revealed every thing he learned from Razak and Altantuya regarding their links to Najib, but when he signed on the police statement, none of these details was included.

The police promised to investigate into the facts revealed in this affidavit, but nothing has come out of this investigation so far. And neither was this affidavit allowed to be presented to court, in spite of such application by the lawyer of Altantuya's family.

Most shockingly, Bala and his entire family mysteriously disappeared a day after he announced the affidavit on Jul 4 and never re-appeared until to-day.

It is obvious from the foregoing that justice cannot possibly be served in this murder case, unless proper explanations are provided to the many intriguing questions that are crying out for answers.

And unless an independent panel has conducted a transparent probe into the veracity of Bala's affidavit and the circumstances surrounding the mysterious disappearance of Bala and his family, Najib should not hold any public office, least of the premiership.