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Overcooked by politics

It was been a wild, wild week as PKR de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim almost single-handedly turned the politics of this country topsy-turvy as he fought off accusations that he had sodomised a former aide.

WHEN PKR leaders began their two-day political retreat last weekend at the Quality Hotel in Shah Alam, they were in an upbeat mood.

They were there to assess their progress and chart the "road map to Putrajaya," as one of them had put it.

But minutes after their evening session had begun, news of an alleged sodomy complaint against Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim hit them like a tonne of bricks.

"It was shocking, so surreal. Who would think something like this would happen again?" said Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, a former aide to Anwar and now Seri Setia assemblyman.

As the devastating news spread like wildfire via SMS, many PKR leaders must have felt the world crumbling around their ears.

A very long and bizarre week in Malaysian politics was about to begin.

When DAP MP for Bukit Bendera Liew Chin Tong arrived at the hotel at about 1.30am to offer moral support, the PKR core leadership were huddled in discussion in a suite on the 24th floor.

Anwar was genuinely anxious and he said: "Maybe we were moving too fast."

"Ultraman," the name that some PAS politicians have for Anwar, had come down to earth with a sobering thud.

PKR president Datin Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail looked visibly tense and she told Liew that this time, at least, the children were all grown up and she did not have to explain to them.

Most of those in the room hardly slept that night but the next day, they were on the attack.

PKR leaders flashed pictures of Anwar's accuser, Saiful Bukhari Azlan, a handsome 23-year-old former aide, posing with a string of Umno ministers. The most damaging was one of Saiful with an official of the Deputy Prime Minister in the latter's office complex.

Even though the pictures did not prove anything, PKR leaders had claimed round one of the perception war.

Overnight, the accused party had turned accuser.

On Tuesday night, as Anwar stood before a capacity ceramah crowd at the indoor stadium in Shah Alam, the pressure and strain was obvious. His face looked drawn and his eyebrows were arched in a deep frown.

He was still in the white and grey checked shirt he had worn to the Shah Alam police station earlier on in the afternoon. He had not had time to change and even less rest.

There has been a media pandemonium everywhere he has gone the past few days. A photographer caught in one of those media crushes said that even David Beckham and Posh Spice would not attract as much attention if they came to town.

Accusations and counter-accusations have flown like bullets from both sides of the political divide and the rapidly changing events were all that most adult Malaysians could talk about the past week.

They have been consumed by the political developments or as one editor said, Malaysians have been "overcooked by politics."

Said another editor: "They say a week is a long time but in Malaysia, 24 hours is a long time in politics."

Because of the way events were unfolding till late into the night, editors have had to

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Saiful: The handsome 23-year-old looking calm in the eye of the storm.



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scramble to update the front page of the paper past the hour of what is known as putting the paper to bed.

By midweek, it was apparent that Anwar had his guns trained on no less than Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

At yet another packed press conference, Anwar accused his Umno rival of involvement in the Altantuya case, citing from a statutory declaration by a private investigator connected to murder accused Razak Baginda.

Some of the allegations were as outlandish as those made in another statutory declaration regarding Najib's wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, and Najib did not waste time quashing them the same day, flatly denying any connection to the dead Mongolian lover of Razak.

Political tit for tat

The name of the game seemed to be that if one party can be accused of sodomy, then the other party should be accused of equally outrageous acts.

It was a sort of political tit for tat except that it was no child's play because the stakes are tremendous. Personal reputations were at stake and political careers at risk.

"They accuse us of conspiracy but what do we have to gain from this? We're being banged right, left and centre by people on the Internet. We don't want a repeat of 1998 because it ruined the reputation of so many people but we cannot have him belittling the police, judiciary and Umno leaders," said Umno Youth secretary Datuk Rahman Dahlan.

Unfortunately, it is no longer about who is telling the truth or who is right or wrong. It is about public perception and what people believe or want to believe, which PKR leaders seem to understand very well going by their



Bizarre week: Even with the sodomy claims hanging over him, Anwar has been able to dictate the course of events to his advantage.

damage control.

The way Anwar has dictated events following the explosive police report is pretty amazing and something that the ruling coalition cannot ignore if it wants to remain the ruling coalition.

First, was the way PKR was able to so swiftly cast doubts on Saiful by exploiting his so-called ties with Umno leaders. It showed how well they used the power of technology and their connections to the United Fraternity where Saiful had studied before dropping out.

Second, seeking refuge at the Turkish Embassy focused international attention on Anwar's plight. He also wanted the diplomatic immunity because he was paranoid — and justifiably so — about a repeat of 1998 when masked men with automatic weapons burst into his house to arrest him in front of his family.

»The allegations are God's way of reminding him that he is human. He thought he was Ultraman, flying so high, fighting monsters«

AN ULAMA FROM KELANTAN

Third, was the way he fanned speculation of a conspiracy against him by claiming that he was about to announce a by-election, that four MPs were about to jump and that he had proof that the Attorney-General Tan Sri Gani Patail and Tan Sri Musa Hassan, now the IGP, had plotted against him.

And finally, there was that very wild attempt to link Najib to Altantuya.

He set out to influence public opinion by creating doubts and tearing down the credibility of the other side. It's ridiculous to think we would try anything like that after what happened the last time. We're not that crazy and

the claim of a death threat is beyond ridiculous," said an Umno official.

A Merdeka Centre survey showed that only 6% of Malays believe in the allegations and that 59% of them believe the allegations are politically motivated. It was painful proof of how the ruling coalition is still struggling in the battle for credibility.

In fact, Anwar has done such a grand job of turning the political crisis to his advantage that some in Umno even suggested Anwar had hatched the plot himself. But that would be like Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad claiming that Anwar's black eye was self-inflicted.

Dr Mahathir has been rather quiet. But he must surely know that one of the reasons why Anwar is ahead in the perception war is because of the fiasco of the 1998 round of allegations.

By the end of Malaysia's long week in politics, the issue seemed less about the sodomy claims against Anwar than about how the Government was conspiring against him. He had flipped the spotlight glare to Najib and other government figures.

The entire episode eclipsed the mid-term review of the 9th Malaysia Plan and the day-long technical breakdown at the KLSC on Thursday did not help the situation. It was a field day for conspiracy theorists.

Merdeka Centre director Ibrahim Suffian said Anwar had been trailing in Malay support because of PKR's need to take a multi-ethnic stand on issues.

"He would have regained some ground among the Malays with this," said Ibrahim. PAS leaders have stayed on the sidelines unlike previously when they were at the forefront in defending Anwar.

But said an ulama from Kelantan: "He is innocent until proven guilty but the allegations are God's way of reminding him that he is human. He thought he was Ultraman, flying so high, fighting monsters."

However, Anwar is far from grounded no matter how desperate he seemed to be or how wild some of his allegations.

He has turned around an adverse situation, put his accusers under siege and, like it or not, he has shown that he intends to fight to the end.