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Memoirs open old wounds

The allegations of sexual escapades in the memoirs *A Doctor in the House* reignite a feud between former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his former deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim that had dominated the politics of the country for over a decade.

THE memoirs *A Doctor in the House* by Dr Mahathir has opened old wounds and re-ignited the fierce feud between him and Anwar over the latter's alleged sexual escapades.

The sex allegations were the basis for Anwar's 1998 sacking and jailing for corruption - events that abruptly ended his rising political fortunes in Umno, of which he was deputy president and just one step away from becoming prime minister, his cherished goal.

Dr Mahathir, whose memoirs is selling like hot cakes, devoted a chapter to Anwar in which he alleged that Anwar, now Pakatan Rakyat leader, arranged to have sex with four girls at a house in Kenny Hills, and did not touch on his alleged homosexuality when he defended himself before the Umno supreme council in 1998 and declared he had done nothing wrong and accused other council members of doing the same.

The allegations in the memoirs could be hugely detrimental to Anwar, who is also Opposition Leader in Parliament, because it restates alleged sexual improprieties from the past to a new generation of young people who are also

potential voters.

Pakatan Rakyat leaders acknowledge that the allegations in the memoir could colour younger voters' perception of Anwar's leadership and possibly damage their chances at the polls.

The allegations in the memoirs resume a feud between the two leaders that had dominated the politics of the country for over a decade and led to Anwar's sacking, first as Umno deputy president and later as finance minister and deputy prime minister in 1998.

Dr Mahathir retired in 2003 while Anwar was still in prison, convicted and serving a six-year sentence for corruption. However, he was acquitted and freed in 2004 by the Federal Court on sodomy charges.

Despite the prison and six-year break from active politics, Anwar made a sterling comeback putting together a loose coalition of his PKR, DAP and the Islamic PAS, to win handsomely in the 2008 general election.

The loose coalition later became Pakatan Rakyat but is now tattered following defections, massive internal squabbles within PKR and disagreement between DAP and PAS



over the place of Syariah laws in a secular society.

Even as the memoirs rip into Anwar for alleged sexual impropriety and damage his standing as an Islamic leader, here and abroad, Anwar is still faced with the outcome of the second sodomy trial that hangs over him and Pakatan like an uncertain dagger.

It is obvious, too, that Pakatan, as a political coalition, is extremely weakened without him as its head.

It is unfortunate, too, that Anwar, whose image is badly tarnished by the repeated allegations, is increasingly a liability to the coalition and potentially weakening it.

Anwar is a liability, some PAS leaders are saying privately, citing the unremitting attacks on him by his former aides and spicy revelations from the ongoing sodomy trial as examples of indignity that are difficult for the Pakatan to live down,

especially among conservative Malays in rural Malaysia where Umno holds sway.

Dr Mahathir's memoirs has unexpectedly re-ignited the old sex scandals for a new generation of Malaysians, who see the former prime minister as a leader who had lifted a colonial backwater into a modern, economic powerhouse.

The fact that the memoirs sell also indicates that Dr Mahathir remains relevant and continues to keep his ability for powerful polemics against old rivals like Anwar and is able, through his writings and speeches, to influence public perception of Anwar.

This generation also sees Dr Mahathir as a hero for "saving" the country during the 1998 economic crisis by doing the unthinkable i.e. fixing the ringgit's exchange rate to the dollar and imposing capital controls.

Perception is the key factor in voting patterns and is the reason why Pakatan did so well in 2008 with older voters seeing Anwar as a victim of political conspiracy.

But the new generation may not buy that idea any more, especially after the revelations at the sodomy

two trial and, now, in Dr Mahathir's memoirs.

The memoirs could spark a re-examination of the events leading to the now famous estrangement between the two leaders, which was essentially a power struggle but was couched as a moral battle where Anwar was labelled as "unfit" to become prime minister because of sexual impropriety.

Anwar has dismissed the allegations in the memoirs as "blatant lies" from a man suffering from "selective amnesia" and his long-time lawyer Sankara Nair has advised the Pakatan leader not to pursue legal action against the memoirs as it was "old news".

Nevertheless, the memoirs and the fresh allegations against Anwar are in the public space and liable to be repeated endlessly and become fodder during election campaigns.

With so much baggage trailing behind him, Anwar remains the incorrigible optimist still able to promise Pakatan Rakyat that Putrajaya is within grasp and he could become prime minister and rewrite the political rules.

Fit or unfit, the issue is ultimately in the hands of the voters.