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Malaysia's looming election

Video nasties

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KUALA LUMPUR

A two-year election campaign nears its climax

WITH a tight election coming up, it is politics as usual in Malaysia—only more so. This month alone has seen the opposition accused of colluding in a foreign invasion of the state of Sabah in Borneo; the death of a private investigator, reviving stories of the grisly murder in 2006 of a beautiful Mongolian woman linked to a friend of the prime minister, Najib Razak; the leader of the opposition, Anwar Ibrahim, denying that he was one of two men appearing in grainy pictures online in an affectionate clinch; and a film shot on hidden cameras that appears to show large-scale corruption in the government of the other Malaysian state in Borneo, Sarawak.

Sailing blithely above the mud and filth that make Malaysian political waters so murky, Mr Najib went on national television on March 19th to deliver the scorecard on the “transformation programme” his government has implemented. He had a good story to tell, of robust economic growth of 5.6% in 2012, poverty virtually eliminated, inequality reduced and 400 legal cases against corruption initiated. And he was able to announce that a scheme to give cash handouts to poorer households will become an annual event.

All should be set fair, you might think, for Mr Najib's ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), to romp home again at the election, as it has done in every ballot since independence in 1957. Mr Najib is expected to dissolve parliament any day now, with

the voting to follow in mid-April after a brief official campaign period (the unofficial one has now lasted two years or more). If he does not dissolve parliament, its term will expire at the end of April, and the election must then be held by the end of June.

In fact, the outcome is in doubt, for the first time in Malaysia's history. In the election five years ago the opposition coalition, the Pakatan Rakyat, for the first time deprived the BN of the two-thirds majority that allows it to change the constitution. That led to the downfall of the BN prime minister of the day, Abdullah Badawi. His replacement by Mr Najib was decided by their party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which represents the Malays (who make up about 55% of the population) and dominates the BN. In 2008 Pakatan actually won a slight majority of the popular vote in peninsular Malaysia (ie, excluding Sabah and Sarawak). Affirmative-action policies introduced more than 40 years ago to favour Malays and other indigenous groups over the Chinese and Indian minorities were no longer enough to ensure an overwhelming victory for the ruling coalition.

The BN says it would like to campaign on Mr Najib's record of relative economic success, modest liberalising reform and statesmanship. The opposition wants to keep the focus on issues of fairness and corruption. It can boast of good performances by governments in some of the

four (out of 13) states it controls in Malaysia's federal system. But its best hope is that, after more than five decades of BN rule, many Malaysians want change.

This time, some Pakatan members express utter confidence that it will come. That is probably bluster. The odds still favour the BN. Constituency sizes give greater weight to voters in the countryside, who tend to be more conservative than the wired, cosmopolitan and cynical residents of the cities. Mr Najib has the advantages of incumbency—such as deciding when to call elections. Waiting has deprived the opposition of the chance of postponing elections in the four states it governs. Simultaneous elections tend to favour the BN, with its greater resources.

The risk in waiting has been that unexpected events might intervene. One such has been the extraordinary saga of the “invasion” of Sabah in February by nearly 200 gunmen calling themselves followers of a pretender to the title of the Sultan of Sulu, whose holder in the southern Philippines once ruled Sabah as well. What seemed at first a kind of practical joke turned into an extremely ugly confrontation, in which 62 of the intruders and ten men from the Malaysian security forces have died.

The suspicions of opposition involvement (vigorously denied) stem from the composition of Sabah's population. A commission is investigating the award of ▶

Also in this section

- 28 Shipping accidents
- 29 Election time in Pakistan
- 29 Politics in Sri Lanka
- 30 Japan and free trade
- 32 Banyan: Sonia Gandhi

| | |
|-----------|---------------|
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Malaysian citizenship in the 1990s to about 800,000 Filipino Muslims. The BN is accused of trying to change the ethnic make-up of Sabah, and of importing potential voters. Sabahans of Filipino origin, however, might be alienated by a fierce crackdown on the intruders. Perhaps with that in mind, coverage of the mopping-up operation on state-controlled television stations has been low-key. Indeed, even if the invasion might harm the BN in Sabah, the government's handling of it may have helped it overall.

Nor will the government be much worried by the impact of the death from a heart attack on March 15th of a private investigator who in 2008 had accused the prime minister of having been involved with a Mongolian woman. His death has revived interest in the story of her murder in 2006 by two members of an elite commando corps. Mr Najib has sworn on the Koran that he never met the woman, and although the case continues to create excited chatter online, it is ignored by the main-

stream press. In opinion polls, Mr Najib remains very popular, with an approval rating of 61% in one recent survey.

The steady stream of improbable allegations of sexual impropriety against Mr Anwar, however, although always denied, may have eroded his standing. They may also create tensions within Pakatan, whose three components are Mr Anwar's multi-ethnic party, a conservative Islamist one and the Democratic Action Party, dominated by members of the ethnic-Chinese minority. Perversely, some Chinese remain worried by Mr Anwar for a different reason: his early days as a firebrand Islamist student leader.

That he still has some chance of becoming prime minister is testimony to widespread anger at the corruption endemic in Malaysia. The hidden-camera film on Sarawak, produced by Global Witness, a London-based NGO, produced shocking evidence of state-government criminality in land deals. Its many viewers in Malaysia are furious. But they are not surprised. ■

the shipping industry suspect, it will have been another entirely avoidable tragedy.

Preventing liquefaction should be fairly simple. It involves checking the moisture content of susceptible commodities. If they are too wet, a surveyor will deem the cargo unsafe and not to be loaded. Time and again in Indonesia, checks have been inadequate. With the bulk-shipping business in the doldrums, the profitable nickel trade is a siren call for ship owners and charterers. Indonesia's ministers and mandarins in Jakarta, the capital, refuse to comment on the tragedies and have done little to tighten policing at faraway ports in Sulawesi, Maluku and Papua.

Ship captains report intimidation by miners and agents if they refuse to accept cargo. A leading marine insurer says the ports' remoteness makes it hard to sample cargoes reliably. Local officials turn a blind eye to unsafe practices. Peter Lundahl Rasmussen at Bimco, a maritime association, says surveyors trying to do their job have been assaulted or arrested.

With insurance claims mounting, shipping bodies and insurers have issued plenty of instructions about how to load nickel ore safely, especially in Indonesia. The International Maritime Organisation (IMO), the UN agency responsible for shipping safety, is also taking steps to tighten the regulations for commodities that can suffer liquefaction.

But the IMO's process is a glacial one, and the new rules will not clear its various committees and be promulgated until at least 2015. Even then, the organisation relies on its members to enforce regulations. In Indonesia, in other words, the impact of tighter rules may be minimal. Moreover, existing and planned legislation covers ore depots and the ports, but not the transit between the two, where rain may do its dangerous work. Steve Cameron at RTI, a risk consultancy, argues that it would be more

Shipping

Deadly trade

JAKARTA

An avoidable tragedy tarnishes the reputation of Indonesia and of the bulk trade

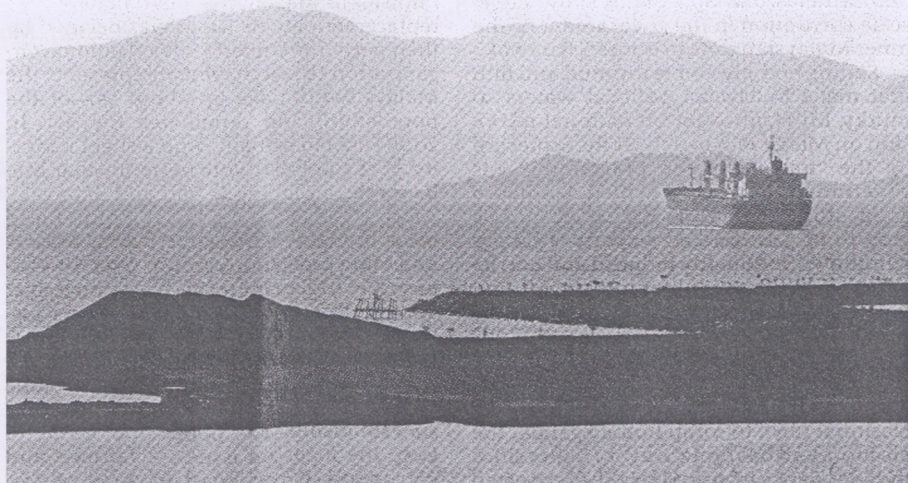
A DARK underbelly exists in Indonesia's thriving trade with China. Since late 2010 five ships loaded with Indonesian minerals have sunk when bound for China, with huge loss of life. Little has been done to break the deadly trend. Indeed, plenty of interests have an incentive to hush it up.

The latest ship to founder is the *Harita Bauxite*, a bulk carrier which sank on February 17th near the Philippines. Of its 24 crew, who were all or mainly from Myanmar, ten were rescued, one of whom later died. Fourteen were still missing when the search was called off two weeks later.

The vessel is thought to have been carrying nickel ore, a potentially deadly cargo, loaded on Obi island in the remote Indonesian province of Maluku and destined for China's steel mills. In terms of the global bulk trade, shipments of nickel ore from Indonesia to China are tiny: just 2m-3m tonnes out of more than 4 billion tonnes of bulk goods carried each year on over 9,000 vessels. Yet this backwater trade accounted for four of the 20 bulk freighters lost worldwide during 2010-11, and for 66 of 82 deaths, according to Inter-cargo, an association of ship owners.

All four ships were found to have sunk because the cargo had liquefied. Nickel ore is dangerous because if it gets too wet, the

fine, claylike particles that are often present in the ore turn the cargo to a liquid gloop that sloshes about the holds with such momentum that even a giant ship can capsize. The four ships had loaded during Indonesia's rainy season. The ore is typically stockpiled in the open. Quite how the *Harita Bauxite* foundered is not yet clear, but if liquefaction was a factor, as many in



Far away and out of sight