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Anwar says 'no' to Dr M

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Politicians from the opposition coalition are starting to find out just how troublesome it can be to ride the tiger; even if it is an old tiger named Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

IT was a slim and rather dapper Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who appeared in court earlier this month. He must have lost at least 10kg since his imprisonment and that has changed the shape of his face.

But he was his usual well-groomed self, his complexion looked clear and smooth and his grey suit and baby-blue shirt sat well on him.

His rather old-fashioned pair of rimless glasses have been replaced by more trendy dark-framed ones.

Anwar's court appearance was in connection to his application for a royal pardon.

Prison has been tough for this sociable and energetic politician but he is no ordinary prisoner.

Home Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi told

Parliament that Anwar gets special concessions like hot showers, his bed fits the specifications of a high-end hospital bed and his diet includes cereal, low-fat milk, honey and dates.

He was allowed to attend his father's burial last year and also his sister's funeral last month. A few months ago, he was brought to visit his daughter in hospital.

His family has applied to be allowed physical contact with him during prison visits after their demand that he be moved out of prison to home arrest was not entertained.

He gets a wall-mounted fan over a desk, a sit-down toilet and he has used the prison library 51 times.

It must have been during his library time that he penned the letter that whipped up such a storm the past week.

A great deal has been written about the letter from prison but the long and short of it is that Anwar is distancing himself from the Citizens' Declaration. More than that, he has disassociated from the campaign's leading figure Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The man whom PKR members call "ketua umum" or paramount leader still has considerable influence over his party.

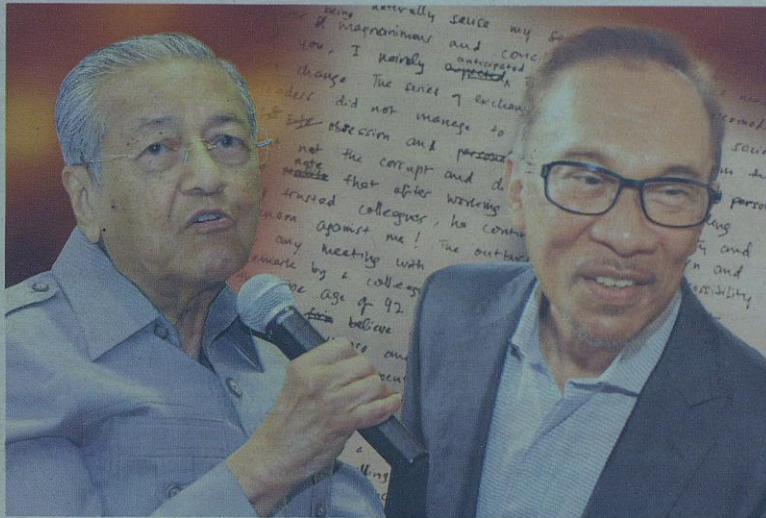
Basically, Anwar's letter managed to channel all the feelings of conflict and discomfiture that many politicians inside and outside of PKR had about working with Dr Mahathir.

Its impact also had to do with the poignancy of a voice coming from behind the prison walls. Anwar is quite the master of psychology; he knew he was in no position to demand or even to advise, so he couched the letter in the form of a plea and an entreaty, and it worked beautifully.

Moreover, it was written in that Malay way of cushioning hard opinions with flowery prose.

"He has not rejected the campaign, he is telling us to be cautious because he knows the character of Dr Mahathir," said Dr Afif Bahardin, deputy leader of the party's Youth wing.

And with PKR deputy president



Obsessive campaign: Dr Mahathir has climbed on the Pakatan Harapan platform to push his anti-Najib agenda but Anwar's letter from prison almost stole the thunder from the elder man.



Azmin: A central figure in the Citizens' Declaration.



Soong: Anwar's letter changes the script significantly.



Dr Afif: Anwar is advising, not rejecting citizens' campaign

Datuk Seri Azmin Ali playing a central role alongside Dr Mahathir, the letter was, rightly or wrongly, perceived as directed at him.

Dr Mahathir has been around long enough to understand what it means. His younger nemesis has the ability to cripple the campaign if he so wishes.

"It changes the script significantly," said Fui Soong, CEO of the CENSE think-tank.

Anwar was quite prepared to go along with the campaign until the interview Dr Mahathir gave to an Australian newspaper during which he spoke about Anwar's "immoral behaviour" and how he was unfit to lead the country.

PKR president Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and vice-president Nurul Izzah Anwar had refused to sign the "Mahathir document", as Anwar puts it. It looks like the letter has closed the door on any possibility of support from the Anwar family.

"He wants support from those he has hurt the most, like Anwar's wife and children. He's not even contrite. How do you expect them to respond?" said Tawfik Ismail, a former Umno MP and a known critic of Dr Mahathir.

The former premier will be

The more he talks and the more he attacks, the more people will be reminded of his past. It'll only make his enemies stronger.

Tawfik Ismail



leaving for Japan and Korea soon. He is scheduled to speak at the Nikkei Conference where he will likely continue to run down Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

The immediate hurdle ahead for Dr Mahathir is not Anwar but the Malay Rulers. He had joked that he was unable to deliver the 1.2 million signatures collected for the Citizens' Declaration because of the King being under house arrest.

The Palace is not known for rejecting petitions but what happens after that is anyone's guess.

That, said Tawfik, is yet another institution Dr Mahathir will have problems with.

"He talks of going to the Malay Rulers after making them powerless and figureheads. He is going back to people he has made enemies of," said Tawfik.

Dr Mahathir views history from his own unique prism. It has been said many times and by many people that the way Dr Mahathir talks, it is as though ill like corruption, cronyism, abuse of power and economic fiascos began only after he stepped down from power.

Street protests or bad-mouthing the country and its leaders abroad was wrong in his time but not anymore.

It is a sort of selective amnesia. But that is Dr Mahathir, the Malaysian James Bond with a licence to kill.

"It's like this, if he is not in the driver's seat, every direction is wrong. Personalities like them always have to be in charge. I think if even his son were to take over, it would not be fine if things are not done his way," said social historian Dr Neil Khor.

The concerns raised about 1MDB are legitimate and it is a big deal being able to amass 1.2 million signatures.

Yet very few people actually believe the figure because the lukewarm nature of the campaign thus far does not look anything like a 1.2 million-signatures campaign.

In his frustration, Dr Mahathir has resorted to name-calling, referring to Najib as *Najis* (filth) and running down Umno division leaders as "deaf and dumb" and whose "grandchildren will curse them".

His new friends from Pakatan Harapan were not spared. He lashed out at their infighting and

said that they will never come to power because of their inability to unite.

Dr Mahathir was one of those great politicians of conviction in his time. He has a dim view of consensus politicians and his leadership was defined by a single-minded sense of purpose and direction.

Being in power for 22 years gave him the opportunity to achieve great things but it also opened his regime to great abuses and scandals. Many older Malaysians were prepared to overlook the bad and remember him for the good he had done.

But every time he criticises the current regime, it is like spitting skywards – some of the spittle splatters back on his face.

"The more he talks and the more he attacks, the more people will be reminded of his past. It'll only make his enemies stronger," said Tawfik.

The opposition coalition thought he would whip up a fantastic political momentum that would get them out of the hole they had dug themselves in.

One DAP politician from Johor had even written about Dr Mahathir creating a "Malay tsunami".

But Dr Mahathir has become the most problematic factor in the campaign to topple Najib.

Three months after the Citizens' Declaration took off, the Pakatan Harapan politicians sharing the same stage as him are still justifying why they are with him.

On the other hand, Umno politicians who joined the campaign are still trying to convince their own supporters why it is not wrong for them to be on the same stage as DAP's Lim Kit Siang.

Some people see the campaign as the politics of principle. But Anwar's letter has stripped it bare and exposed it as pure politics.

"I thought it was not going to work from the word go. It's not because he is jinxed or has lost his touch. It's because the system he created is going against him," said Soong.

According to Soong, Dr Mahathir created an extremely powerful system around the office of the Prime Minister and the leader of Umno.

"But that's now in the hands of someone else. He is trying to undo it all from outside and that is not the way politics is played today," she added.

If the Citizens' Declaration campaign was a bus and Dr Mahathir its driver, then Anwar has just yanked the handbrake. No matter how hard Dr Mahathir steps on the accelerator, the bus is not going to move as fast as before.

And if Dr Mahathir is not careful, Anwar may order his supporters off the bus and Dr Mahathir will find himself with just a few passengers left and on the road to nowhere.