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The Ballad of Anwar and Mahathir

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COMMENT Dr Mahathir Mohamad met Anwar Ibrahim at the Kuala Lumpur High Court on Sept 5, 2016. Anwar was there to file his suit against the government over the National Security Council Act 2016 on grounds that it was unconstitutional.

Mahathir went to show his support for the suit and ended up talking to Anwar for half an hour. What is the political significance of the meeting? Some people immediately said, “Politics is the art of the possible”, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend”, and “We have no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests”. These lines are blasé. They tell us nothing beyond the obvious.

Nor can we be happy surely to be told that everyone should leave the past behind and go forward “in the national interest”, to “save the country”, and so on.

First, no one’s going anywhere, not when the past weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. Some people demanded that Mahathir should apologise for every wrong that he’d done (and there were people who thought that whatever he did as prime minister was wrong). Second, when Anwar disagreed with Mahathir on how to solve the financial crisis of 1997-98, and Mahathir had Anwar jailed, weren’t they both acting to save the national economy?

One journalist repeatedly asked Anwar if he trusted Mahathir. Luckily Anwar wasn’t so crass as to ask, “Do I have to kiss him?” - which was how Mahathir retorted when he was asked if they were on good terms, shortly before he fired Anwar. An opposition politician thought that the meeting would rattle Umno. One Umno politician (pointless to remember the name these days) approved of the meeting because it would cause PKR members to leave the party in disgust.

What Mahathir and Anwar said

Evidently few were prepared to take Anwar and Mahathir at their word - at least the few words they uttered outside their private conversation. That is an error. We watch what politicians do. We don’t just heed what they say. Hence, there’s that other cliché about how they should ‘walk the talk’. There are times, however, when we dissect what little we hear for what it bears.

What was the most important thing Mahathir said? It was that he went to support Anwar over a crucial issue on which their positions agreed. He would not be drawn into talking about making peace or working for Anwar’s release. What was the most pertinent thing that Anwar mentioned? He was silent on the past and about trust but he remarked that Mahathir “has now embraced the reform agenda”.

“A single detail,” a French news editor notes, “is sometimes enough to sketch an ideological picture.” Can we sketch an ideological picture from that single detail of a fateful meeting?