

Newspaper	NEW STRAITS TIMES
Date	18 MAY 2016

A million signatures and a letter from prison

NST- 18/5/2016



FORMER prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad dropped a bombshell on Sunday when he urged the opposition to unite and defeat Barisan Nasional (BN) in the two upcoming June 18 by-elections in Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar.

The occasion was to present some one million "Save Malaysia" signatures that BN political leaders later dismissed as a "political gimmick"; that those signatures were obtained from college and university students.

His nemesis, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, stole the thunder from under him.

The former deputy prime minister

issued a lengthy, hand-written eight-page letter from prison that became public this week, questioning Dr Mahathir's bona fide for reforms and warning of the dangers of working with Dr Mahathir.

Anwar acidly describes the movement's "citizens' declaration" as a "Mahathir document in principle, flawed and inconsistent with PKR's reform agenda", something BN leaders have been saying all along, but from a different perspective.

The letter, which gained wide currency in opposition circles, warns of Dr Mahathir's pitfalls and worried whether the institutional reforms he wanted would be sidetracked.

The feuds between the two leaders are legendary and have dominated national politics for the best part of two decades.

When former law minister Datuk Zaid Ibrahim mooted a movement under Dr Mahathir to oust Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak in April, Anwar and his men readily jumped on it, seeing it as part of their own reform agenda.

But as the "Save Malaysia" movement got underway, it became abundantly clear that Dr Mahathir dominated and set its agenda.

Anwar did not like it.

He felt that his desire for genuine institutional

reforms would not be forthcoming from the "autocratic" Dr Mahathir.

While Anwar has made his freedom the central plank of opposition politics, Dr Mahathir's view is narrow — the removal of Najib and his replacement with another Umno leader.

"All he wants is to see the back of Najib. Not reforms, not freeing Anwar and not changing anything," said a political analyst, who declined to be named.

Anwar felt disenchanting.

"He wrote a lengthy prison letter in which he outlined once again to his acolytes his reform agenda. He is checkmating Dr Mahathir... I think they have cancelled each other out."

Anwar has been preaching institutional reforms from day one and it came as a surprise that he had agreed to work with Dr Mahathir, whom he sees as his tormentor.

"Anwar wants someone he could absolutely trust to remain committed to his struggle while he languishes in prison," said Associate Professor Dr Sivamurugan Pandian of Universti Sains Malaysia.

"He is worried that he may lose the plot before his release as many PKR and opposition leaders have started to get close to Dr Mahathir."

He added that parts of the letter shows "personalised politics versus idealism politics", which are typical of Anwar who quotes extensively from Shakespeare and other "revolutionary" poets to give the doc-

ument an idealistic dimension.

PKR secretary-general Rafizi Ramli told an online portal that Anwar's letter was timely and sought to put context to it by saying, "it is a reminder to us not to be carried away by Dr Mahathir's agenda".

Political analysts speculated of another dimension to Anwar's prison letter — the growing influence of Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Azmin Ali.

Azmin had readily jumped on Dr Mahathir's bandwagon and was at the forefront of Sunday's event, together with Dr Mahathir.

"Anwar is worried Azmin had joined forces with Dr Mahathir to sidetrack his hold on PKR and its reform agenda," said a long-time PKR watcher.

He said Azmin's relationship with Dr Mahathir was rather cosy, too cosy for Anwar.

In the letter, Anwar alludes to PKR leaders who seem awestruck by Dr Mahathir and "lower themselves" as if caught in a feudal culture. He worries about "traitors and fake warriors" in the "reformasi" struggle he sparked some two decades earlier.

"He could be taking aim at Azmin, whose influence in PKR has expanded ever since he became menteri besar and controlled the purse strings," said a PKR source. "He might be worried that his legacy is being sold for power and influence."

The idealism that once fired PKR has long been doused.