

# Past controversies return to haunt Dr M

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Regardless of whether the Malays wish to blame others for the mistakes by the Pakatan Harapan government, the buck has to stop at the feet of the then prime minister.

Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

THE past has returned to haunt two of the most controversial personalities from the ousted Pakatan Harapan government.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his then attorney general Tan Sri Tommy Thomas are back in the spotlight following the Cabinet's decision to re-examine the Pulau Batu Puteh issue as well as allegations related to Thomas' book, *My Story: Justice in the Wilderness*.

It will be particularly difficult for Dr Mahathir going by the noise generated so far.

No less than the Sultan of Johor has opened fire by demanding a "clear explanation" on why the Federal Government failed to appeal the International Court of Justice's decision to award sovereignty of the disputed island to Singapore.

The Sultan seems to be pointing the finger at Dr Mahathir when he asked how Kedahans would feel if Langkawi was lost to Thailand.

Johor politicians have also weighed in, with Mentri Besar Datuk Seri Hasni Mohammad demanding legal action against those responsible for the fiasco.

Others like former Pulau MP Datuk Seri Nur Jazlan Mohamed have laid the blame squarely on Dr Mahathir.

"They tried to blame Pak Lah (Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) and Najib (Datuk Seri Najib Razak). But the decision to drop the case was done during Pakatan's time.

"Giving up sovereignty to Singapore amounts to treason. We want Dr Mahathir to be prosecuted if it was his decision," said Nur Jazlan, who is also Johor Umno deputy chairman.

The task force on Pulau Batu Puteh has been given six months to recommend further action to the Cabinet.

Another task force looking into allegations that Thomas made about the government, especially the judiciary, will be headed by a retired top judge who has yet to be named.

Thomas' book ruffled feathers and dozens of police reports were lodged against him. It is a fascinating book but, as they say, the chickens have

come back to roost.

The Cabinet is also re-examining the death of fireman Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim during a racially-charged riot at a Hindu temple in 2018.

An inquest had ruled that his death was a criminal act by more than two persons but no one has been prosecuted.

Justice for Adib is particularly important because he is no longer around to tell his own story and there has been no closure for his family.

The decision to relook these thorny issues is one of the most significant moves by Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob since becoming Prime Minister in August.

"These were thorns to the Malay community," said political risk analyst Datuk Wan Shihab Wan Ismail.

Pakatan's decision to drop the Pulau Batu Puteh case in May 2018 passed largely unnoticed because Malaysians were still too swept away by the change of government.

But there was no escaping the outrage over the death of Adib in November of the same year, especially with its explosive cocktail of race, religion and gangsterism.

"That was the beginning of stirrings among the Malays. They felt the government tried to brush aside Adib's death.

"It was the start of Malay disillusionment with Tun Mahathir. He was not the leader they had hoped for," said Wan Shihab.

He added that the Malay distrust of the Pakatan government had reached a point of no return by the time Malays, all dressed in white, marched through Kuala Lumpur, against Pakatan's bid to ratify Icerd or the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

One of those who spoke at the Icerd rally demanding justice for Adib was Ismail Sabri, who was then the Opposition Leader.

"I can see why the PM resurrected the issues. People think this is a Bersatu government draped in an Umno flag. He wants to signal that he is not a puppet of Tan Sri Muhyiddin

Yassin who did not take up these issues.

"He is trying to reorientate the narrative regarding his premiership. It is not random, it is a calculated move," said Wan Shihab.

There is also no denying the politics behind Ismail Sabri's move.

Umno will have to hold its election next year and Ismail Sabri, currently one of the party's three vice-presidents, needs a strong platform to stand on. Championing these issues will give him some gravitas to move up in Umno.

It is also quite clear that his target is Pakatan leaders since these controversies occurred during Pakatan's time in power.

"What do you mean we are out for revenge? They set the precedent when they came after us, they cannot complain about being subjected to the same fire," said Nur Jazlan.

DAP has questioned why the government is not re-examining the Teoh Beng Hock and Altantuya deaths.

But Nur Jazlan said DAP leaders should be asking themselves why they did not do it when they were in control of the Federal Government.

The chatter in Umno is that Dr Mahathir has the most to lose, given his leading role in the Pakatan government.

"The original Mahathir would have pursued our claim over Pulau Batu Puteh to the ends of the earth. This was the man who took on Singapore, he even wanted to build the crooked bridge in the face of opposition from Singapore.

"It underscores the fact that Mahathir was a weak leader under the thumb of Pakatan. Any hope for him to dominate Malay politics again is gone," said Wan Shihab.

It will always be tough to take on a maestro like Dr Mahathir. But regardless of whether the Malays wish to blame Thomas or DAP for mistakes made during those eventful 22 months, the buck has to stop at the feet of the then prime minister.

The views expressed here are the writer's own.