

Malaysia Plane Mystery Trumps Politics
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The shock of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 seems to have brought a sort of temporary unity to Malaysia, pushing divisive political news and conflict off the radar, at least temporarily.

“This crash has stunned the nation and put politics on hold,” said an ethnic Malay political observer. “There seems to be a sense of anger and outrage and confusion over why anybody would attack a Malaysian plane.”

People "have been sick of the incessant politicking for a long time," said a businessman source. "It is unfortunate that a national tragedy had to happen for people to push politics off their radar. I can see how my kids are affected and depressed by all this. We have discussed nothing else but MH 370 and how stupid our politicians on both sides of the divide are."

Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak postponed an official trip to Mauritius to focus on the search for the missing craft, the prime minister's office said. Malaysia's reigning king, Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah, issued condolences.

It isn't sure if anybody actually attacked the plane, of course. A flotilla of ships and airplanes from nine countries continues to search for the remains the Boeing 777-200 that left Kuala Lumpur Saturday night for Beijing but vanished from radar screens. Vietnamese military aircraft spotted two oil slicks in the South China Sea, but there is no indication that they were caused by the plane when it hit the water – if it hit the water. It's even debatable when it disappeared. Its “black box” apparently stopped sending signals to air traffic controllers 40 minutes into the flight. Other reports say it was two hours into its journey when it disappeared.

In particular, the tragedy and the multiplicity of inconsistencies about the loss of the craft has pushed political stories down the page, including a boiling controversy over the sentencing of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim last Friday to a five-year jail term by an appellate court.

The sentencing was stayed on appeal to the Federal Court, the country's highest tribunal. The verdict was widely believed to have been engineered by forces within the United Malays National Organization to prevent Anwar from registering as a candidate in a Kuala Lumpur suburban by-election that was considered certain to eventually make him the chief minister of the country's most prosperous and populous state.

Given the fractious nature of Malaysian politics and the stunning turnaround represented by the appeals court overturning Anwar's 2012 acquittal, in normal times, social media sites and web portals would be bristling with comment and anger.

Instead, most news sites, whether pro- or anti-government, devoted their resources to the plane tragedy.

Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who is widely believed to have been behind the government's push to put Anwar back in prison for the second time in 15 years, was quoted calling for unity in the face of the disaster. "I think MAS has done its best. Playing the blame game now is not helpful," he told reporters after visiting family and relatives of the 239 passengers on board the missing flight.

The cause of the disaster remains a complete mystery despite speculation that people carrying false passports who boarded the flight might have been terrorists. No explosion has been detected by US authorities who use satellites to monitor the world's skies.

Whether the plane was blown apart by a bomb – of which there is no evidence - there is fury that hijackers might have targeted a Malaysian plane, possibly because of the presence on board of 152 Chinese nationals.

The plane was flying at 11,000 meters, regarded as the safest part of the flight, when it disappeared so suddenly that the pilots were unable to make any radio transmission, an indication of a catastrophic failure of some kind.

When an Air France Airbus disappeared under similar circumstances in 2009, the transponder worked for several days although it took two years to actually find the plane. There is no indication that MH370's black box has been giving off any signals.

MH370 was also equipped with a floating GPS beacon that was designed to transmit its location if it landed in water. The beacon hasn't given off any kind of signal, although the beacon doesn't work if it sinks with the wreckage.

The search for the doomed craft was widened Monday all the way to the Andaman Sea. Conflicting reports had the plane turning back towards Kuala Lumpur when it disappeared, but Malaysian officials said it would have emitted an electronic signal had that been true.

Then there was the matter of the passports stolen in Thailand, one from an Italian male and the other from an Austrian. When they were presented to Malaysian Airlines staff at departure, they were in the hands of ethnic Asians, leading Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi to question why immigration offices "cannot think an Italian and an Austrian but with Asian facial features." Ahmad Zahid announced an immediate investigation into the Immigration Department, particularly the officers who were on duty at the KLIA immigration counter during flight MH370."

"If the plane can't be located, many will conclude that an UFO took it," said one commentator.

One thing is certain: once the wreckage is found and the shock wears off, the anger and bitterness over Anwar's verdict will return in full voice.

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