

**Malaysia Clears the Deck for National Elections**  
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*Embarrassing cases are pushed forward past anticipated summer polls  
What do these controversies have in common?*

- It was announced last weekend that Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Malaysia's minister for women, family and community development, had been forced out of her position as a result of what has become known as the "cowgate" scandal and will step down on April 8 when her current term ends.
- On Mar. 13, the day after Sharizat's husband, Mohamed Salleh Ismail, was charged in court in the alleged misuse of RM250 million of government money in scandal, Zuraidah Kamaruddin, an opposition member of parliament sought to bring up the matter, only to be told by the speaker, Amin Mulia, that the matter is now in court and is therefore sub judice – Latin for under judicial consideration and therefore prohibited from public discussion elsewhere, taking away a potent campaign issue for the opposition.
- On the same weekend Shahrizat was put out to pasture, Malaysia's Securities Commission announced after months of controversy that the embattled chairwoman, Zarinah Anwar, would step down at the end of the month in the wake of a blatant conflict of interest involving her husband's trading in shares.
- Arguments in the appeal of the two convicted killers of Mongolian translator Altantuya Shaariibuu, first expected to be held on Feb. 10, then delayed until March 9, have now been put off until Aug. 27 and 28.
- On Jan. 9, Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim was declared not guilty in his long-running and widely publicized trial on sodomy charges, only to have the case appealed on Jan. 25. The government's appeal of the not-guilty verdict is expected to be held far into the future.
- There are a variety of other controversies hanging fire as well, including the trial of former Malaysian Chinese Association boss Ling Liong Sik over a massive scandal in the construction of the Port Klang Free Zone, in which the government could lose as much as RM12.45 billion (US\$3.93 billion) in the botched construction of the Port. The prosecution finished up its case against Ling several months ago but only recently announced that he must put on a defense. It is uncertain when he will be called to do so.

What these cases have in common is all of these matters are being pushed forward into the future or taken care of in other ways, say observers in Kuala Lumpur.

"They are trying to push everything after June or July which makes us more convinced polls are going to be in June," said a Kuala Lumpur businessman.

Any and all of the matters have the potential to disturb what the Barisan Nasional, or national ruling coalition, hopes will be the smooth conduct of national elections that are expected to be called sometime during the summer, perhaps in May or June.

Of the attempt to declare sub judice the National Feedlot scandal that cost Shahrizat her job Kim Quek, a spokesman for the opposition Pakatan Rakyat, responded in a prepared statement: "It is not difficult to see that the present drama is a carefully crafted

stratagem involving the concerted effort of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, police and the attorney general, to extricate the Barisan Nasional from a potentially crippling predicament on the eve of an impending election.

Well before the end of Anwar's trial in December last year, a source with connections to the United Malays National Organization sketched out a scenario for Asia Sentinel in which Anwar would be declared not guilty of having homosexual sex with his onetime aide, Mohd Saiful Bukhari Azlan.

The theory was that a guilty verdict would generate sympathy for the opposition and for Anwar in that it would be regarded as hopelessly rigged because of a long list of discrepancies in the trial. A not-guilty verdict would be similarly unpalatable for the prosecution because it would be a reminder that Anwar had spent more than three years under a cloud since Saiful made the charge against him on June 29, 2008.

Whether planned or not, the appeal worked out as positive for the government as Saiful's father, Azlan Mohd Lazim, held an emotional press conference demanding that the attorney general appeal "for the sake of my son." Outraged statements over the verdict filled the mainstream press until Jan. 25, when Attorney General Abdul Ghani Othman announced his office would file the appeal. Thus the government got nearly a month of publicity in addition to shunting the decision far into the future.

Equally, the appeal of the convicted murderers in the politically charged case of the Mongolian translator and party girl Altantuya Shaariibuu was obviously a problem because of long-running suspicions in Kuala Lumpur that Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak and his wife, Rosmah Mansor, were somehow connected to the case. At the very least it calls up questions over a 114 million euro "commission" paid to Najib's best friend, Abdul Razak Baginda, for the purchase by Malaysia of submarines from the French defense contractor DCNS. Most of the money is believed to have been kicked back to either UMNO of French politicians.

Altantuya was murdered on Oct. 18, 2006. The interminable delays in getting justice for the murdered woman have led to suspicions that the delays are deliberate in order to erase the crime from the public mind. In the latest episode, the appeal of the two murderers supposedly was delayed from Feb. 10 because records of the trial were sent to the prison where one of the bodyguards was incarcerated, something lawyers in Kuala Lumpur find inconceivable, since records are always delivered to the defendants' attorneys and never to the inmates themselves. Then, although the case was to go to the appellate court on March 9, it was quietly moved forward to August.

"If someone suggested to me that is why all the timing seems to be falling into place just about now (in preparation for an election), it certainly is what people are thinking," said a Kuala Lumpur-based lawyer. "You need to be aware of what's going on. Damage control, that is what they are doing."

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