

Time to close the Anwar file

Badawi needs a clean slate too

FORMER Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad was a complex man to say the least. His period of rule, the longest in the country's history that spanned more than two decades, witnessed radical transformation of Malaysian, especially Malay, society in almost all respects. From an economic backwater post-colonial state he turned Malaysia into a rapidly developing newly industrialised country. From a largely rural agrarian based society he turned Malaysia into an urban based manufacturing economy where the number of educated professionals marked the most significant shift in social relations.

It was also during Mahathir's tenure that Malaysia's foreign policy showed a certain tilt towards the South and the Muslim world, and where Malaysia made a conscious attempt to speak for both. Where other Muslim leaders chose to stay silent, Mahathir was loud and trenchant in his criticism of the West: for its double standards on human rights; its tacit support and collusion with Zionist Israel; and its policy of masterly indifference to the plight of Muslims being killed in places like Bosnia.

But, undeniably, Malaysia's relatively stable development in the 1980s and 1990s was underpinned by one local political factor: Dr Mahathir's success in being able to co-opt to his side the leader of the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), Anwar Ibrahim, and the close partnership between the two that followed thereafter.

It was Anwar Ibrahim who gave to Dr Mahathir – and by extension the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) and the Malaysian government – the Islamic credentials that it badly needed at the time, so that Umno could present itself not only as the defender of Malaysian interests but also Muslim concerns. It was also Anwar who shielded Mahathir from the various attacks and calumny thrown on the man by others who accused the prime minister of being 'too secular', 'too westernised' and too obsessed with material development and economic success.

It is well known that institutions such

as the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), and the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC) would not have materialised without the help and patronage of Anwar himself. Today these institutions and reforms are seen and presented as evidence of Malaysia's commitment to uplifting the voice, status and image of Islam worldwide. But it should not be forgotten that Anwar was the primary motor that moved these developments.

However, things fell apart when the economic crisis of 1997-98 struck, and due to a clash of personalities and differences of opinion about how the economic crisis could be overcome, Dr Mahathir fell out and clashed with his erstwhile ally and protégé, Anwar. There was a point beyond which Anwar felt he could not oblige his political mentor and benefactor by bailing out his kin and cronies.

What followed has become the stuff of modern legend: Anwar was dismissed in September 1998 and a few weeks later arrested at gunpoint in his own home before a crowd of dumbstruck local and foreign journalists. Blindfolded and bound, the man who was once seen as the potential successor to Mahathir was later assaulted by the inspector general of police, Tan Sri Rahim Noor. Malaysia's image as a civilised and developed Muslim state plummeted as never before, and overnight the years of careful planning and statecraft had been laid to ruins.

Malaysia is now set to make a spectacular rebound: economic growth has exceeded five per cent and the global augury on Malaysia is a positive one. As the new head of government, Abdullah Badawi has done things which were seen as impossible just a few months ago.

He has directed the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) to open up the files of numerous unresolved cases and brought some of them to court; outstanding has been the case of Eric Chia, former manager of Perwaja Steel. Malaysia's steel giant went bust a decade ago, incurring losses worth millions of dollars to the country. Badawi has also ordered a special royal commission on the conduct of the police. A controversial plan has been

pushed through to introduce national service – ostensibly to improve race relations and instil a sense of common identity among the youth.

By tackling issues like corruption, abuse of power, police brutality and sensitive racial issues Badawi has effectively taken the country on a new track. He has, however, one outstanding matter to resolve: Anwar.

In mid-2003 a group of International Islamic scholars wrote a petition to Badawi (then deputy prime minister and minister of home affairs) to release six political detainees who had been held under Malaysia's notorious Internal Security Act (ISA), a relic of the British colonial era. Contrary to expectations, Badawi did in fact release the detainees.

However, Malaysia still has one important prisoner that the world has not forgotten: Anwar Ibrahim. The sordid and pathetic saga of the Anwar story remains as one of the most unsightly blemishes on Malaysia's record. Prior to the sacking and detention of Anwar, he was vilified and demonised by the tabloid press, with all manner of lurid allegations against him.

In the trial that followed, witnesses broke down, others claimed that their confessions were made under duress. Bringing the reputation of the Malaysian judiciary to an all time low, even a mattress was dragged to the court to 'prove' allegations of sexual impropriety. For all its claims to development, Malaysia looked like a typical third world banana republic then! Worse of all was the fact that most observers saw this as an internal squabble between factions in Umno, with the vilest form of dirty politics being used to destroy an opponent.

But one thing needs to be borne in mind here: Abdullah Badawi, dubbed the 'Mr Clean' of Malaysian politics, was never part of the conspiracy to topple Anwar. In fact at that time Badawi was a comparative outsider who was marginalised in the top Umno circles.

Due to his lack of involvement in the whole fiasco, Badawi would be the best person to resolve this thorny issue that has been the bane of Malaysian politics and which has sullied the image of Malaysia for so long. Malaysia will now proceed to a new era, but it also needs a fresh start. The new administration has to demonstrate its sincerity by taking its reforms to their logical conclusion. The empowerment of the ACA was a good start, as was the launch of the Commission of Enquiry into Police conduct.

There is, however, a certain feeling in some circles, friendly as well as unfriendly, that Anwar too has not been quite helpful in helping to bury the past, resolve the crisis and move forward, assuming that it was going to be resolved otherwise. The criticism may have some justification but it is not fair. As a prisoner who has been grievously and unfairly wronged and denied even the normal parole given his quite uncomfortable condition, can not be expected to send flowers to those he thinks were, directly or indirectly, responsible for his torment.

Besides being a prisoner, physically, Anwar Ibrahim is largely cut off from

the outside world and depends on the assorted briefing that he may be receiving from various sources. Some may be friendly but not objective, some really friendly but posing as friends.

In a situation such as this, facile judgement must not be made on anyone. The simple point is that no matter what Anwar may be saying, it should not prejudice his freedom. His strident attitude towards Badawi personally, unfair as it may be, makes it all the more incumbent upon an Islamic person like the new prime minister not to allow his personal feelings affect his better judgement.

The bottom line however is that

Anwar as an issue will not go away. Abdullah Badawi looks set to make some major gains in the country and given time and assistance may even be able to remedy the damages that have been caused by so much rapid development over more than 20 years.

However, he needs to begin his tenure in office on a positive note and a clean slate: for that reason, he is the man and this is the time to act. Badawi, for his own sake and that of Malaysia, has to do the right thing and give Anwar Ibrahim the justice he has been denied for so long.

Raja Amin