

# Malaysia: Anwar's trial backfires on Mahathir

Peter Symonds  
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The trial of former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim has only been under way one week and already the testimony of the first prosecution witness--Police Special Branch Director Mohamad Said Awang--has created a major political dilemma for the government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

The case concerns four of the ten charges against Anwar of corruption and sexual misconduct. He is charged with having used his political influence in August 1997 to interfere with a police investigation into allegations brought by his former personal driver Azizan Abu Bakar and by the sister of his private secretary Ummi Hasilda Ali who said Anwar had sex with her brother's wife, Shamsidar Taharin.

According to Said, Anwar had approached him to arrest Azizan and Ummi and to force them to retract their statements. The special branch director proceeded to tell the court of the police intelligence unit's techniques for compelling witnesses to change their evidence and even their stated political beliefs.

'Basically we do a quick assessment of our target, then we see how the possibilities are to turn over their stand,' he said, 'If it is a certain political stand, we may neutralise the stand if it is a security threat.' He said it was known as 'a turning-over operation,' but refused to provide details of the threats, torture or other methods employed, saying that it was 'a great secret'.

Said claimed that he had ordered his subordinates proceed even though they had raised objections. When the first retractions were not explicit enough, he demanded that new ones be written. 'I wanted it to be more committed. It was not clear enough. I thought the letter was not good enough to be sent to the prime minister. The sentence construction and the apology wasn't there,' he said.

Under cross-examination by Anwar's lawyers, Said

agreed that if the allegations were false then Anwar would not have been wrong to ask for a retraction. When questioned on his own role, he claimed that he had felt under pressure to follow the orders of the then deputy prime minister.

He was asked by a defence lawyer: 'If someone higher than the deputy prime minister were to instruct you to come and lie to the court, would you do it?'

'Depends on the situation,' Said replied.

At which point, High Court Judge Augustine Paul interjected: 'So you may lie?'

'I may or I may not,' he said.

Anwar's lawyers backed the Special Branch chief further into a corner when they forced him to admit that he had sent written reports to Mahathir concerning the allegations against Anwar. Having previously denied the existence of the documents, he then had to produce his report written in August 1997.

'Through our sources, the allegations do not have, [or] contain, any proof, and the sequence of events appears to be deliberately created,' he said, reading from the report.

'Apart from that, there are indications that there exists a certain group that may have their own agenda and played a role behind the scenes to urge Ummi and Azizan to smear Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.'

Defence lawyers also questioned Said about a second report dated September 3, 1997 which they claimed contained details of the involvement of high profile political figures, including Mahathir's close ally and businessman Daim Zainuddin who was appointed as a special economic minister earlier this year. The prosecution has been asked to produce this document in court.

Taken together Said's statements underline a fundamental contradiction in the prosecution's case.

Even if the charges against Anwar are true then the obvious question arises: why did Mahathir and other leading figures from the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) go along with a conspiracy to intimidate and threaten witnesses and cover up the truth? According to the police, allegations of sexual misconduct first surfaced as far back as 1992.

If the claims were not true, why the sudden change of heart by the police and the government? Anwar's defence read out newspaper reports of comments made by Mahathir last year stating that he believed that the allegations were false. The prime minister is expected to be one of more than 50 prosecution witnesses to be called in the case.

The police charges have all the hallmarks of a crude smear campaign concocted by Mahathir and his political allies to justify the sacking of Anwar and to block any discussion of the sharp differences over economic policy which erupted within UMNO and business circles as Malaysia plunged into recession.

Anwar was initially arrested without charge under the country's Internal Security Act. He was only charged and put on trial after protests both within Malaysia and criticisms from governments both in South East Asia and internationally. Demonstrations in support of Anwar and democratic reforms continued last weekend.

The government has had to suspend the trial during next week's APEC summit in Kuala Lumpur. Canada, following the lead of the US administration, will not engage in the traditional one-to-one meetings with Mahathir as head of the host nation. Furthermore, Mahathir's proposals for the regulation of currency speculators and international capital markets are likely to come under fire by the US in particular.

The trial of Anwar is not the first time that bitter factional struggles within UMNO have been fought out through the medium of sordid political scandals and the arbitrary use of the courts and the ISA. In previous cases, Mahathir and previous UMNO leaders have enjoyed the backing of international capital and the major powers. Today the government is increasingly isolated. A protracted court battle is likely to further erode Mahathir's base of support and fuel divisions within the ruling elite.

See Also:

*Deepening political crisis in Malaysia*

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[3 October 1998]



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