
Here we go again

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IN FEW countries does the word “sodomy” evoke a sense of political déjà vu. Malaysia is one. On June 28th a male volunteer working for the political campaign of Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the opposition coalition, lodged a police report accusing him of sexual assault. Mr Anwar immediately called the accusation a “complete fabrication” and took refuge in the Turkish embassy, claiming that the government and police could not guarantee his safety. The government found itself in an awkward fix: its relations with the Turkish government were tested; and it had to declare that the safety of its main political rival was of the utmost importance.

When Mr Anwar left the embassy the next day, in a throng of press and supporters, he claimed that the accusation was a diversionary tactic. He said it was meant to derail announcements that he would be standing in a by-election, and that four members of parliament from the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition were about to defect to his side. In elections in March, the opposition made sweeping gains. Since then, a ban on Mr Anwar’s standing for political office has expired, and he has said he is poised to topple the government as its MPs jump ship.

Whatever the motive for the allegations against Mr Anwar, or for his against the government, he seems for the moment to have the political initiative. This is partly a tribute to his political skills; but another factor is the sympathy, or at least indifference, of the Malaysian public, which hoped it had heard the last of sodomy in public life. The term entered the Malaysian political lexicon in 1998, when Mr Anwar was accused of sodomy and of corruption during the tenure of the then prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, whom Mr Anwar served as deputy.

The sodomy accusation was widely believed to be politically motivated, and therefore untrue. The country found itself divided and appalled. But the nature of the alleged crime was scarcely an issue. What provoked outrage were the seemingly untrammelled powers of the prime minister, the dubious role of the judiciary and the blatant bias of the press. Mr Anwar served six years in prison before the sodomy (but not corruption) verdict was overturned in court. Yet perhaps the biggest victim of the episode was Dr Mahathir’s legacy.

Mr Anwar was freed from jail early in the tenure of Abdullah Badawi, Dr Mahathir’s handpicked successor (and now, butt of his fierce criticism). For many this was a happy conclusion to a lurid episode, not necessarily out of any deep affection for Mr Anwar but because what was widely seen as an injustice had at last been corrected. Sodomy, it was hoped, could be forgotten. Mr Anwar was yesterday’s man.

All that changed with the March 8th election. The BN suffered its worst-ever electoral result and MrAnwar leapt back to the forefront of politics. The election could be read as a vote against BN rather than for Mr Anwar’s disparate coalition. But he has since been portraying himself as prime minister in waiting. The sluggish pace of Malaysian politics has accelerated, and the momentum has been dictated largely by the opposition.

Mr Anwar still polarises opinion. A charismatic “comeback kid”, he outshines his rivals in oratory and spin. But he remains an enigma. Some see a genuine democrat, admired by Western liberals. Others recall his youth as an Islamist firebrand, and doubt the sincerity of his transformation. Others see him as simply an ambitious opportunist. The confusion may be helpful: his coalition includes secular liberal democrats, a Malay Islamist party and a mostly ethnic-Chinese party. Mr Anwar is the glue that holds the odd mixture together. Without him it is hard to imagine how the coalition could continue to function or challenge for government.

Since the elections Malaysians have shown that they can cope with rapid change but the recent events have come as a shock. The word “bewildered” litters the Malaysian blogosphere. Conspiracy theories swirl but government ministers have denied any link with the accuser. He himself is in hiding. His family deny he has the backing of the government.

Mr Anwar and his supporters, however, have produced pictures of him with various people linked to the government, including an aide to Najib Razak, Mr Badawi’s deputy and heir-apparent. Mr Najib is enmeshed in scandal himself. One of his advisers is among those accused of the murder of a Mongolian woman. Mr Najib denies any involvement in the case, and he and his wife have denied claims made late last month that she was at the murder scene. But it has at least given Mr Anwar’s camp mud to sling back at his enemies. In 1998 Mr Anwar’s accusers failed to make the charges stick in the court of public opinion. That stands him in good stead as Malaysia hunkers down for an extended, unwanted, repeat performance.

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