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Malaysian Politics in 2015: What Does the Second Jailing of Anwar Ibrahim Portend?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The second jailing of Anwar Ibrahim is expected to unleash a chain of repercussions that will affect both sides of the political divide. What looms is a new phase of uncertainty that may, however, throw into prominence new and younger leaders.

Commentary

AS WIDELY expected, the Malaysian Federal Court has dismissed the appeal of opposition icon Anwar Ibrahim against a sodomy conviction, triggering the start of a chain of events that could shake up Malaysian politics in the years to come. Serving immediately a jail term of five years for what he maintains was a political conspiracy by his enemies, the verdict could well end the 67-year-old Anwar's political career. Besides losing his parliamentary seat, by the time he comes out, he would be 72 – a mite too old to make any political comeback. But the former deputy prime minister has in the past proven to be like a cat with nine lives – and might just be another.

In 2000, two years after he was sacked as deputy premier following a clash with then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad due to differences over the Asian financial crisis, he was jailed for his first sodomy conviction but released four years later when that conviction was overturned. Anwar countered his latest court verdict with a vow to continue his fight from behind bars, thus promising to turn himself into a potent political martyr.

What now?

His fractured opposition alliance, Pakatan Rakyat (PR), could close ranks and turn Anwar's incarceration to its advantage; then Malaysian politics could enter an explosive phase at the expense of Prime Minister Najib Razak and the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. But if the PR fails to overcome its internal divisions, Anwar's jailing will come to nought and the opposition will find itself heading for its demise. Much depends on what PR will do next, but there is no clear alternative leader of Anwar's stature, with his charisma and political acumen to pull the divided alliance together.

This leaves Anwar with no choice but to do the near-impossible of being the leader who pulls the

strings from behind bars - something he had done before quite successfully. A leadership reshuffle is inevitable: Who will now lead the Opposition in parliament; his own Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR); and more importantly, the broader PR alliance given its divided state? This is the time when a core of younger leaders whom Anwar has inspired and nurtured could well emerge in the opposition, such as his daughter, Nurul Izzah, as well as Azmin Ali, Rafizi Ramli and Saifuddin Nasution, to redefine Malaysian politics post-Anwar. An unexpected development is the emergence of more Anwar offsprings to continue his struggle, such as Nurul Nuha.

Anwar's jailing: Good or bad for PM Najib?

His second jailing has two contrasting implications for PM Najib. On the one hand, Anwar will, by law, lose his parliamentary seat and will no longer be a major factor in the political equation. He will miss the next general election. This means the opposition PR will be leaderless to fight the polls, thus virtually assuring Najib's BN of a return to power. But this assumes two things - that Anwar will remain ineffective behind bars and that the opposition allies will indeed fail to close ranks. But it would be a folly not to take the man seriously: he will be the political martyr that he has promised to be, and the opposition might just be galvanised out of anger - thus potentially becoming a more potent threat to Najib.

As it is, the prime minister is already looking at a tough year ahead as he gets buffeted increasingly on the political and economic fronts. He has entered the new year under the clouds of not one but three dramatic airplane disasters affecting Malaysian interests in a space of one year. He is probably the only Malaysian leader since independence to have come under such unprecedented misfortune.

Ominously, the new year was also ushered with one of the worst floods to hit the country's peninsular east coast in a 'mini tsunami'. Unfortunately for Najib, he was at the time photographed by the US media playing golf with President Obama during a private visit in Hawaii. The Malaysian leader could have done without this unforeseen problem, having been already saddled with a number of heavy issues.

He took the rap for losing the popular vote in the last general election to the Anwar-led opposition. A new sovereign wealth fund which he advises, 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB), has been heavily criticised for amassing huge debts so soon after formation. The alarming debt size has drawn heavy fire from two UMNO stalwarts, Mahathir and former finance minister Daim Zainuddin.

Economically, this could not have come at a worse time either: Plummeting global oil prices has hit Malaysia as an oil exporter, forcing the government to revise downwards the national budget. The GDP growth forecast was trimmed from 5 to 6% to 4.5 to 5.5%. Najib, however, shied away from declaring the economy in crisis or recession. "We are neither in a recession nor a crisis (as experienced in 1997/1998)," he said when revising Budget 2015.

On a related front, the sliding economy was piling on the country's politics: the drop in oil prices was not accompanied by a corresponding decline in the prices of consumer goods. It led to one UMNO minister accusing "Chinese traders" of profiteering and calling on the majority Malay community to boycott Chinese businesses. There were even alarmist statements of economic sabotage by certain parties to profit from the falling national currency, the ringgit. This is probably the first time since the 1998 financial crisis that such talk has resurfaced.

Political risks

As he meets his challenges, Najib has to ensure that his ethnic-based ruling coalition remains stable. But a key partner, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), broke into a public power feud, forcing Najib to step in. Another component party, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) had just recovered from its own power struggle. In the anchor party, UMNO, there are undercurrents against Najib's own position, led by Mahathir, who however, may be somewhat mollified by the re-jailing of Anwar.

Najib cannot afford the new year taking a nasty trajectory, especially after Anwar's conviction. Besides, 2015 will also be a year when Malaysia comes under the spotlight as chair of ASEAN. He needs to steer the ship of state through the stormy weather ahead. Will he display sufficient political skill to ensure his survival as leader?

At the same time, Najib will be watched whether he would manoeuvre to forge a “unity government” between UMNO and the opposition PAS in the state of Kelantan which was badly hit by the recent floods. All in all, there are driving forces which promise to make 2015 a year of conflict or a year of survival through wily compromises.

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