

Malaysia's Losing Battle Against Corruption

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A sudden spate of sleaze allegations unsettles politics at the top of Malaysia's biggest political party

An unappetizing stew of allegations against high-ranking politicians and top bureaucrats is eating away at Malaysian Prime Minister Ahmad Abdullah Badawi's popularity.

Many of the ingredients emanate from an angry former Anti-Corruption Agency investigator who charges he was sidelined because he refused to shut up about corruption among top officials of the country's biggest political party.

Then there is the unrelated case of the deputy internal security minister, Mohd Johari Baharum. He is in the spotlight over a claim accusing him of accepting RM5 million (US\$1.4 million) to assist in freeing several suspects detained under Malaysia's Emergency Ordinance, which covers suspects accused of serious crimes. Local news reports say the released suspects are believed to have been involved in gangsterism, prostitution, illegal gambling, and illicit money lending.

The latest allegations are a further embarrassment to Badawi, who won a landslide victory at the last polls - with Johari as an ally - on promises to root out corruption. The situation raises questions over whether the prime minister, whose personal honesty has traditionally been regarded as beyond reproach, has the backbone — or the clout — to clean out the United Malays National Organisation, the dominant political party in Malaysia's ethnically-based ruling Barisan National coalition that has ruled the country since independence from Britain in 1957.

Former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is skeptical. "The government likes to talk about the rule of law and the perils of corruption but there is a significant gap between its words and its actions," he said in an email interview with Asia Sentinel.

Mohd Johari is a case in point. He has been seen as a strong Abdullah supporter since he took an active stand that helped bar former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad from the UMNO party general assembly last September. The former premier, who had been launching a fusillade of complaints at his successor, was expected to go after Abdullah publicly at the general assembly. Denying him that national platform largely took the wind out of Mahathir's sails. The charges against Mohd Johari, if they are true, illustrate Abdullah's dilemma: the need to remain in power trumps cleaning out the stables.

It is unclear how much the corruption allegations have hurt Badawi's political chances. The prime minister is expected to take the coalition to the polls in the coming months and defeating a leader backed by UMNO is unheard of, although Anwar Ibrahim, who was jailed by Mahathir on sodomy and corruption charges after a political dispute, is stumping the country, warning about corruption. It is more likely that UMNO would trade Abdullah in for a new candidate if he were perceived to be weak, but so far there are no signs of that happening.

And, for all the allegations flying around, the country's corruption perception ranking is still better

than its neighbors. In an annual survey released this week by the Hong Kong-based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (PERC), the country outpointed Thailand and Indonesia, ranking 7th among 13 Asian countries surveyed. The Philippines was last.

Nonetheless, the first Malaysia Transparency Perception Survey, published in 2006, described integrity and transparency in government agencies as problems that were “acute and serious.” The survey, commissioned by Transparency International Malaysia, was conducted by the independent Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research. The survey also found that the police force, road transport departments and customs and excise department were among the least transparent agencies. The concluded that the incidence of bribery in Malaysia increases proportionately to income level, with a whopping 52 percent of those earning RM5,000 and above monthly acknowledging having paid a bribe or having a family member who had done so.

The perception of levels of corruption is also having an adverse effect on FDI as according to Political and Economic Risk Consultancy. Malaysia’s economy is perceived by foreign businessmen to be more corrupt this year than it was last year.

The charges against Mohd Johari come just weeks after another round of allegations of graft and sexual assault - against the very person that would have been tasked to investigate Johari. Anti-corruption chief, Zulkipli Mat Noor is under intense public fire over allegations that he has vast business and real estate interests. Before retiring in December, anticorruption agency officer, Mohamad Ramli Manan, told police in a report that described Zulkipli was “a very corrupt senior police officer who had amassed substantial property and assets through corrupt practices”. Zulkipli has also been accused of operating two petrol stations said to be registered under the names of his son and sister.

Sexual assault charges stem from an unnamed woman who filed police reports in Kuala Lumpur and the state of Negeri Sembilan.

A parliamentary integrity committee was supposed to hear from both Zulkipli and Ramli last Monday on whether Zulkipli should continue to head the corruption agency, but the meeting was cancelled. Under public pressure, it was rescheduled for March 22. It has not yet been decided if the hearing is sub judice, or under court consideration and therefore subject to reporting restrictions, because Ramli has filed a libel suit against Zulkipli and five others over letters allegedly defaming him.

There are also questions over the spectacular slaying of Mongolian beauty Altantuya Shaaribuu, who was allegedly murdered by two police officers in Malaysia’s elite Special Operations Force as she sought to force top political advisor Abdul Razak Baginda to acknowledge fathering her baby and to pay her additional funds. Abdul Razak has close ties to Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, who supervises the Special Operations Force. Razak Baginda is due to go on trial for complicity in the murder in June.

“There are indications of serious misconduct by officials within or closely connected to the ruling party,” Anwar said. “We are talking about hundreds of millions of ringgit that have been stolen from the public coffers. Yet in each case there has been a rather appalling lack of follow-through on the part of the authorities in investigating these cases”.

The controversies affecting Johari and Zulpikli have been met with calls for their suspension pending further investigation. However, Abdullah Badawi has downplayed the charges, telling the press that generally more than 85 percent of corruption allegations are untrue and that care must be taken when launching investigations. The prime minister also told reporters Zukipli had been investigated twice before and found to be clean.

The corruption saga has also ensnared another minister from the Mahathir administration. Ramli charged that he was sidelined while in service and put in 'cold storage' after he persisted in investigating then-land and cooperative development minister Kasitah Gaddam for corruption involving a multi-million dollar share deal in the politician's home state of Sabah seven years ago. Soon after beginning his probe, Ramli was transferred out of Sabah and relocated back to the agency's headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. Despite being one of the most senior officers, Ramli said, he wasn't given a new position or even a desk at headquarters.

"For six years, I punched in my (attendance) card and got my salary. They gave me RM8,000 for doing nothing," he said.

Ramli's application for a transfer to another government agency as well as early retirement were denied. When he finally retired last year, he discovered that his pension was held back as a result of "disciplinary proceedings" taken against him, apparently for failing to punch in his attendance card. Ramli charged that he believed Mahathir was responsible for his transfer, which the former prime minister later denied publicly.

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