

## Malaysian PM's Wife Draws flak

Contributed by John Berthelsen  
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Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak's wife blazes her own controversial trail

The surat layang — "flying letters" in Malay, or anonymous assaults -- have been flying in record numbers in recent weeks, attacking Rosmah Mansor, the wife of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. They are being picked up and spread in volume by the country's blogosphere, much of it arrayed against the Barisan Nasional, or ruling national coalition.

It isn't certain who is behind the attacks, but they are clearly tied to national elections expected either late this year or early in 2012. The opposition and the dominant United Malays National Organization are blaming each other and both saying they aren't involved. But the 60-year-old Rosmah has become a lightning rod for criticism of the administration, most of it centering on her alleged profligacy and her reported dominance of her husband's political and social agenda. The attacks compare her to both Shakespeare's Lady MacBeth, who drove her husband to murder and tragedy, and to former Filipino First Lady Imelda Marcos, who gained fame for her extravagance including owning hundreds of pairs of shoes.

More ominously, as Asia Sentinel has reported, she has been the subject of rumors for several years that she somehow was involved in the murder of Mongolian translator Altantuya Shaariibuu, to the extent that a businessman close to her allegedly paid a witness RM750,000 to get out of the country after he said the dead woman had an affair with her husband. In addition, court testimony has indicated that she met with a former aide to Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim prior to the aide's accusing Anwar of raping him.

Those in Anwar's Pakatan Rakyat coalition say the attacks on Rosmah are coming from Muhyiddin Yassin, the 64-year-old deputy prime minister and protégé of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Muhyiddin played a major role in driving former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi from power and has long been regarded as being ambitious to succeed Najib should the prime minister stumble.

Added to that equation, the sources say, are Mahathir's own ambitions to see his third son Mukhriz, currently the deputy minister of international trade, as deputy prime minister. Muhyiddin also fits Mahathir's political philosophy more than Najib does. He is an advocate of Ketuanan Melayu — ethnic Malay dominance of the economic and political landscape, in opposition to Najib, who is committed to his so-called 1Malaysia campaign, an attempt to bring other races back into the Barisan Nasional fold. Mahathir has become increasingly strident in his calls to preserve Malay dominance as well.

Sources in the United Malays National Organization blame the accusations on Pakatan Rakyat as an effort to blacken Najib's reputation and hamstring the ruling national coalition in advance of elections expected later this year or early next. One aide to a top UMNO politician says neither Mukhriz or Muhyiddin would be likely to attack Rosmah as Najib's surrogate now. If serious infighting broke out within UMNO, the aide says, it would seriously cripple the party and the Barisan in advance of the polls.

If Mahathir and Muhyiddin were really after Najib, the aide says, it would make no sense for them to be daring the destruction of their party and the loss of even more of the Barisan's power, which was severely dented in March 2008 elections when for the first time in the country's then-50 year history its two-thirds hold on parliament was broken by the opposition. Other sources say that Mahathir himself owes a debt of gratitude to Najib's father, the late Tun Abdul Razak, for rehabilitating him after he had been kicked out of UMNO by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first prime minister, and that he wouldn't go against Najib for that reason.

However, observers point out, Muhyiddin hasn't been publicly defending either Najib or Rosmah lately. One businessman in Kuala Lumpur told Asia Sentinel: "Mahathir and Anwar are both working towards the same objective even if they aren't working together — get Najib out."

Rosmah has been controversial since well before Najib became prime minister. The newest sensation appeared a few weeks ago with a report by a Kuala Lumpur-based opposition blog that she had received a US\$24.8 million diamond ring from the New York-based Jacob & Co. jewelers and that the ring had passed through customs without duty being charged. Rosmah has said publicly that: "There is nothing I want to say (in relation to the purchase of ring) because I have no time to entertain such issue." She later denied buying the ring.

She has also been photographed carrying what appears to be a Birkin handbag, designed and manufactured by Hermès of Paris and named for the actress and singer Jane Birkin. Prices of the bags range from US\$9,000 to US\$150,000 according to the type of material used. She has been photographed as well wearing what appears to be a 65.77 carat white and black Zebra safari bangle bracelet, also from Jacob & Co. and made of white and black pave diamonds and 18-karat white gold.

In addition to her taste in jewelry, Rosmah has raised hackles about her influence on government, rumors that she is enriching the family and because of the social life she leads. Particularly galling to some is her claiming the title of Malaysia's first lady, a title usually reserved for the wife of the king. A six-person unit has been established in the prime minister's office, known as FLOM, an acronym for First Lady of Malaysia, to look after her needs, a far cry from the wives of previous prime ministers such as Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, Mahathir's austere physician wife.

Sources say Rosmah has continually inserted herself in the political process and has been responsible for spending vast amounts of government money — for instance, as much as RM80 million in a 15-month campaign to refurbish the Prime Minister's residence.

In April 2010, Joshua Wong, then the producer of the popular Malaysian current affairs program "Editor's Time," resigned, charging that the NTV7 channel, which is controlled by UMNO, buckled under from complaints from the Prime Minister's Department and Rosmah personally about coverage of opposition politicians. Other newspaper editors complain that she frequently calls to complain about coverage of both her and her husband.

Last year, tongues began to wag in Kuala Lumpur over Rosmah's taste for the high life in New York and other capitals, particularly because of her reported closeness to Low Taek Jho, who calls himself Jho Lo and spent an astonishing amount of money on starlets, movie actors and celebrities in New York. Low routinely dropped as much as US\$60,000 a month in Manhattan night clubs, according to the New York Post, which said Low once sent 23 bottles of US\$900 Cristal champagne to troubled actress Lindsay Lohan's table as she was celebrating her 23rd birthday.

&ldquo;This Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania graduate from Malaysia,&rdquo; the New York Post reported Aug. 1, 2010 &ldquo;has burned through hundreds of thousands of dollars at the city&rsquo;s hottest nightspots in the last three months &mdash; and shows no signs of stopping.&rdquo;

Low, who was said to be pals with Paris Hilton, is also believed to be the mystery man behind a US\$180,000-US\$230,000 advertisement that ran in April 2010 in the New York Times congratulating Rosmah for being Malaysia&rsquo;s &ldquo;first lady.&rdquo; after she received the inaugural &ldquo;International Peace and Harmony Award&rdquo; from an obscure US-based business group. The Times first said the advertisement had been placed by the government, then reversed itself three weeks later and declined to say who was behind it.

On April 16, 2010 according to the New York Post, Rosmah and Najib were given a star-studded party in honor of the award that was emceed by actor-comedian Jamie Foxx and attended by a flock of movie stars including Charlize Theron and Robert De Niro and included performances by Grammy-award nominee Leona Lewis and the Harlem Boys Choir. The Nut Graph, a Malaysian Blog said the festivities included a karaoke duet version of &ldquo;You&rsquo;ve Got a Friend&rdquo; performed by Rosmah and De Niro, who was later invited by the Rosmah to visit Malaysia.

News media including the New York Post and Gawker in the United States say Low, the son of a wealthy Chinese family from Penang, owes much of his cachet to his friendship with a Kuwaiti and fellow Wharton graduate, Hamad Al Wazzan, the chairman and CEO of the Al Wazzan Group of Companies in the US.

An UMNO source in Kuala Lumpur says Low used his links with Rosmah to become the middleman in a massive land deal in Kuala Lumpur -- the redevelopment of the 152-hectare 80-year-old Sungei Besi Air Force Base, a prime, centrally located site that appears to have been awarded without tender to a joint venture between 1Malaysia Development Sdn Bhd and Lembaga Tabung Angkatan Tentera (LTAT), the armed forces retirement fund.

According to local media, the project is being developed through a joint venture with the Qatar Investment Authority, possibly with the involvement of Abu Dhabi&rsquo;s Mubadala Development Co.

Whether it is fair or not, the flying letters are giving a growing segment of the Malaysian public the impression that Rosmah has become a major detriment to her husband.

Whichever side is delivering the allegations, they may be having an impact. Mustapha Ali, the secretary-general of the opposition Parti Islam se-Malaysia told a press conference Wednesday that a revolt is brewing in UMNO because Najib and his wife had become a liability to the Barisan. Reportedly, Mustapha told the reporters, party officials fear the long string of scandals are affecting voter sentiment.

That, of course, is the opposition trying to stir up trouble in the Barisan. An UMNO source told Asia Sentinel that &ldquo;this is the opposition intensifying their attacks before the election. They are weak &rdquo;

But clearly the surat laying are flying indeed.