

13/04/1997

Dealing with issues from the `political margins`

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DOWN on the street below, the amplified vocals of the pop diva Celine Dion and a band of blind musicians compete to be heard above the rumble of traffic.

The overall effect is sheer noise and another typical day along Jalan Tuanku where former Parti Melayu Semangat '46 (S46) deputy president Datuk Rais Yatim has his law firm.

His office occupies two floors of a rust-brown building where a security camera records everyone who comes in from the street.

Rais' office - physically, at least - is not your typical law office. Were it not for the shelves of law books, it might have passed for a middle-class apartment, with its bewildering mish-mash of too much furniture, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, decorative knick-knacks, photographs and more photographs.

There is a showcase feel about the place and an air of underutilisation, almost like that of a museum.

But Rais is no museum piece.

In fact, he looks snappy in a jacket with a houndstooth pattern worn over a striped white-and-blue shirt that had tiny steel buttons.

It may have been the light that day or the angle from which the NST photographer shot the picture, but more than a few persons were to point to his striking resemblance to former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam.

There is also an intellectual bent to him - he is interested in ideas and concepts. In fact, his firm does quite a bit of work on intellectual property.

Rais speaks flawless English and has a superb command of Malay. He is said to be a good public speaker but the last time I heard him at a ceramah in Kelantan, he had fairly droned on.

Apparently, being on the "political margins" - his own words - has not stopped him from voicing opinion on issues most politicians shy from.

A sample - money politics, corruption, public accountability, rule of law, the Constitution.

And he is a little peeved over the mainstream media's seeming lack of enthusiasm for such issues.

Being in the Opposition is no fun as he must have discovered during nine years on the other side of the political fence.

Rais was in "Team B" and events following the contentious Umno elections of 1987 saw him replaced as a Minister. When S46 was formed, he became its deputy president, a post he held till the party's dissolution last October.

Today, he is just an ordinary member of Umno.

"I have really come full circle," he says with not a little irony.

Actually, Rais played a key part in bringing together the two parts of the original Umno. He was the one who contacted Umno's Datuk Megat Junid Megat Ayub whom he knew would carry the message back to Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The rest is history.

His rationale for "reunification" - the preferred term - has oft been repeated by S46 leaders - two general elections have shown which way Malay sentiments lie; things have changed; and, perhaps, the most interesting of all the reasons, the Dr Mahathir today is no longer the Dr Mahathir of 1987.

Less mentioned are the political frustrations of being on the outside, their troubles with PAS in Kelantan, dwindling funds and shrinking sympathy. But Rais, one can see, is making a valiant effort to be philosophical about it all.

He talks of how his time is now devoted to his family, work, writing, and reading. He even takes the LRT to work from his Ampang home - a huge contrast to the days when he would be jetting north, south and east in a single day.

The truth is, the influx of ex-S46 people into Umno has had quite minimal impact within the party after the initial euphoria.

To date, only 20,000 of the former ex-S46 members have been accepted by Umno, a fraction of the 200,000 who were supposed to have followed Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah over.

The membership issue is evidently a sore point for former S46 leaders.

Then again, the fact that no one publicly disputes the 200,000 figure does not mean that everyone believes it.

According to Rais: "Many feel disappointed with the time taken (to process their membership applications) and the attitude too. We have done our part (rejoining unconditionally) but there have been no overtures from divisions and branches to make us feel at home."

Despite the plethora of welcome statements from Umno's rank and file, the situation at the division and branch levels has been cool at best.

The reality is that in the time the splinter group was trying to make it in the Opposition, a whole new generation had moved in to fill the vacuum.

It is unlikely nor would it be reasonable to expect this group to willingly accommodate the returnees especially in posts and positions.

"They (the returnees) will have to earn acceptance all over again," says political scientist Dr Hussein Mohamed of Universiti Malaya.

Although Rais is now a member of his old Umno branch in Kampung Gagu, he gets the sense that the Jelebu divisional leadership "puts me at arm's length."

In fact, the appointment of Rais's former political rival Datuk Mokhtar Hashim as treasurer of Umno Negeri Sembilan - the appointment is the talk of Umno - is widely seen as a move to check Rais' possible advance in the State.

Some think Rais has been away too long to be much of a political force.

"He is yesterday's man," says UM's Hussein quoting a BBC documentary on former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson shortly after the latter left office.

Others argue that if Mokhtar can make a comeback, why not Rais.

Rais is already being reminded of the adversarial things he used to say about Umno and the Government.

The most indictive reminder of those days lies in Executive Power, a hefty volume based on his PhD thesis.

He makes no apologies for his past words and action: "It was constructive."

And, the fact that he is back in Umno has not stopped him from dwelling on some of his pet subjects. For instance, he recently sent copies of his paper on money politics to all the English newspapers.

"None found it `suitable' for print," he says with a sardonic emphasis on the word "suitable".

Rais says he raises such issues not to make waves but because he genuinely believes that they ought to be aired and discussed if Malaysian society is to mature into the industrialised nation envisaged by 2020.

"For that, we need transparency and accountability. Malaysia needs a strong moral fibre so that the economic vibrance of the day will last."

Like many Malaysians, he was moved by Dr Mahathir's powerful speech

against money politics at the party's last assembly and describes it as the "most beautiful, constructive and reformative speech" he has heard in years.

"I thought the bureaucracy would translate it, examine corruption laws. The ACA would be busy looking into political donations, into leaders dishing out perks but..."

He sees himself playing an "input role"; he was probably too modest to say "moral conscience".

Rais will turn 55 in a fortnight's time. In Umno's early years, this would be about the age when things started happening for potentates.

But times have changed and great things now happen to thirtysomethings and fortysomethings. Thus, this eloquent and, by most accounts, highly talented politician may have missed the boat coming back now.

"Missed the boat? He jumped ship!" says an unforgiving Umno politician.

Apparently, his stunning declaration that he had "burnt his bridges" in leaving Umno for S46 is not forgotten.

"It was considered an 'un-Malay' thing to do," according to a Malay journalist.

The more fatalistic say he shot up too quickly, and that's why he fell "just like that".

Rais, who worked in a variety of jobs before he graduated in law from the University of Singapore in 1973, was quickly noticed by then Prime Minister Tun Razak Hussein.

The general election of 1974 saw him elected MP of Jelebu and appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports.

His jumpstart in politics was the start of a dizzying ascent through the corridors of power - Deputy Law Minister (1976-78), Deputy Home Minister (1978), Menteri Besar of Negri Sembilan (1978-82), Land and Regional Development Minister (1982-84), Information Minister (1984-86), Foreign Affairs Minister (1986-87).

"He was one of the bright ones. He performed as a Minister and he was good with the grassroots," says Datuk Shahrir Samad, whose own career began during the Razak era.

It helped that Rais was married to the glamorous and gregarious Datin Maznah who was the sort of wife with whom political careers are made.

The NST photographer who came along with me remembers her as an active VIP wife and extremely photogenic. She is, in fact, an accomplished person in her own right, having written books and dramas.

Rais is very proud of her: "My wife is marvellous, never lost her composure although I think she suffered more than me."

While her husband was shunned by "friends", Maznah found she could not get her books published or her dramas aired.

He says now: "We should not be so hysterical about the Opposition. We shouldn't avoid the dinner plates and kitchens of Malaysians just because they are in the Opposition."

Rais is particularly fond of a large photograph of Razak and him that hangs in his room. But it is the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman who occupies place of honour in his heart.

Of Tunku, he says: "He was very inspiring; his humility and wisdom is unmatched... as well as his basic instincts as a human being. When he died, a part of me went with him."

Framed photographs of Tunku hang in almost every room in Rais' office but the most endearing is a profile shot of Tunku speaking at a ceramah with a tiny, pink hearing aid nestled in his right ear.

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