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Silent majority: Speaking out when it counts most

Joceline Tan

THE scene was the Pesta Konvo of the International Islamic University more than a week ago and the officiating VIP was Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

One of the first things Najib noticed when he arrived for the event was that almost all the students were wearing pearly white ribbons.

The Minister grinned sportingly and told a IIU staffer on the aside: "Yah, yah, I get the message."

But just in case he had not, one of the students pinned the white ribbon - the Reformasi group's symbol for justice and democracy - on the breast of his suit.

Feelings are still high in the campus over the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

University and college students have formed the bulk of the weekly Reformasi demonstrations taking place initially at Jalan Raja Laut and then Kampung Baru which had initially left the authorities somewhat nonplussed.

First, there was the tenacity of the protests; then, there was the misleading impression that Malaysia was turning into another Indonesia.

Says a Penang businessman: "It was happening only in a small area but the impression was something else. I had friends saying, how can you go to KL?"

But perhaps more disturbing was the fact that the protesters were overwhelmingly Malay and their main target was the Malay leadership.

Although the party line has held quite well throughout all this, the fact remains that Umno has not encountered such diverse Malay opinion and reaction since the big split of 1987.

And particularly for Umno Youth, it must have been disconcerting to see all those young Malay youths on the other side of the fence.

Political figures insisted the demonstrators were not representative of the majority of Malaysians or what it termed the silent majority. This was a case, they said, of the vocal minority versus the silent majority.

But it took public indignation over Al Gore's dinner faux pas to lend credence to this claim. The reaction to the American Vice-President's remarks has marked a turning point of sorts in the ongoing political polemic over Anwar's sacking and trial.

The silent majority rumbled to life.

Rita Sim, the managing director of a local company, was one of those who put her name to an advertisement protesting Gore's remarks.

"There are many like me, uncomfortable with some of the things happening but with no direct channel to show it. I had wanted to do something even before this but things then were such that you'd be either for Anwar or Dr Mahathir."

Sim says she wanted to show how she felt "in a more issue-driven way".

Even then, the feedback to her citizen action was mixed. Many were supportive but some still viewed it as a pro-Mahathir move and reminded her that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had been equally outspoken on the affairs of other countries.

"But things are cooling down," says Umno's Datuk Ibrahim Ali, referring to the Al Gore controversy on the one hand, and the "Raise the Flag" campaign on the other.

Ibrahim's navy-blue Mercedes Benz sports one of those flags as well -

not an MBf freebie, but purchased in Jalan Chow Kit. The stallholder in Chow Kit had a nice sales pitch, he remembered - fly one for patriotism and peace - so he bought it.

Ibrahim is one of the Umno supreme council's most vocal members and an unabashed disciple of the party line and the president. But even this party-liner does not deny that for a while, the Reformasi group had him and other Umno figures on the defensive.

The past week has, however, seen the ruling party regaining the upper hand and holding forth the olive branch: form and register your own political party, come off the streets, take your grievances to the ballot box, discuss it at dialogues.

The obvious aim is to put an end to the protests but the gestures are also likely to find resonance among a large number of ordinary Malaysians, even those passively sympathetic to the Reformasi group.

The point is, the average Malaysian is still largely uncomfortable with the idea of street protests particularly since the protests moved to Kampung Baru.

This Malay enclave in the heart of Kuala Lumpur still teems with symbolic negativism for older generation Malaysians, especially Malaysian Chinese.

In that sense, Chinese politicians have got their fingers on the conservative pulse of their grassroots base by stressing the following: economic well-being, political stability and cultural freedom.

Says the same Penang business figure: "For businessmen, anything that hurts business is bad. It prevents business from coming in and it's unfortunate that people outside cannot see the difference between Malaysia and Indonesia."

And although a large number of Malaysians may be critical of the Government and the way it has been run, they aren't exactly itching to jettison the present set-up for something entirely new and unknown.

"This is not like Britain whether there are clearly two alternatives - Tory or Labour. The Malaysian electorate is to a large extent loyal to their parties and that includes the opposition. But it is also conservative and afraid of change," says a former judge.

And, according to the retired judge who witnessed the events of 1969: "I have nothing against peaceful demonstrations but I've seen and even had to deal with mobs before and I know it's so easy for some trouble-maker to just shout pukul or bunuh and everything goes boom! It's too full of risk and danger."

But he does not deny that the demonstrators has some valid grievances that cannot be simply brushed aside.

"What you see on the streets is a reaction to a situation. I also think there is some over-reaction on the part of the authorities. My proposal would be ... allow them legal channels to voice themselves ... perhaps a permit for ceramah or rallies," he says.

It is not quite sure who, exactly, is behind the Reformasi group but its more visible supporters include tertiary students, opposition political parties, non-governmental organisations and civil servants.

"What started as a pro-Anwar movement has snowballed into an anti-establishment uprising of sorts. Simply put, various interests have come together and given it a life and momentum of its own.

"There are also those who join without understanding the real issues ... it's like a pesta to them. The good thing is that it has not assumed racial tones," says Universiti Malaya academic Mohamed Abu Bakar.

There are those who are in it solely because they support Anwar and are angry about what has happened to him. Reformasi to them means freeing Anwar and replacing Dr Mahathir as Prime Minister.

The pro-Reformasi political parties are much more ambitious.

For instance, Pas' Ahmad Subky Abdul Latiff who writes a column in Harakah, says: "Reformasi means we want a change in government, to replace the Barisan Nasional with a new government."

And, he adds, it is not necessary to spell out the nature of the alternative government just yet.

"Let's change the colour first. Then you have your pen and I have my pen and together we draw the picture," says Subky who also seems quite oblivious to how the majority of non-Muslims view his party.

The DAP, on the other hand, has been extremely cautious about being too closely associated with the protests. It is all too aware of the way the bulk of the Chinese community feels about the Anwar issue and street protests.

But, as pointed out by UM's Mohamed, while these diverse groups and individuals may have their own aims and agendas, there is also common ground such as their declared desire for a greater say in the policies of the country.

It is this aspect of the group which perhaps strikes a chord in those watching from the outside. This segment of population is also part of the silent majority; they are not particularly partisan and are probably even quite apolitical, supporting neither Anwar nor Dr Mahathir.

In fact, they are likely to ask cynically: if, by tomorrow, by a twist of fate Anwar is back in government, do you think Reformasi will go on? Or if it does, do you think he will be heading it?

But that does not mean they do not want Anwar to have a fair trial. They do - and very much so - just as they would want the same for themselves should they have encounters with the law.

And it is perhaps in this context that those who now enjoy the upper hand could take note. Each general election sees a younger electorate and a widening historical gap between them and the generation who witnessed the country's independence.

Umno, to this younger generation, is a political machinery unlike the earlier generation for whom Umno was the expression of the country's struggle for freedom from colonialism.

It explains why their worldview does not exactly dovetail into that of their parents' generation or those now ruling the country.

Their perception of events and issues, politics and politicians, government and institutions is quite different as evident from even a casual read of the postings on the Internet.

They are educated, exposed to world events, quite aware of their rights, rather cynical of politics, mocking of propaganda and they really dislike being patronised.

As a body of opinion, this group is still limited in terms of size and influence. In fact, it took the Anwar issue for this group to get noticed as a distinct body of opinion.

But, although still limited in size and influence, all the signs are there that they will one day form a segment of populace to be reckoned with politically. In that sense, the next generation of political leadership will probably have to be quite different in terms of outlook and approach.

Malaysians, as businesswoman Sim puts it, will also have to learn to approach issues from a less personality-driven perspective.

And that may perhaps also mean a shift in emphasis from personalities to a strengthening of the institutions of the state.

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