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Lies, tapes, name-calling reflect new political frenzy

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ABOUT a fortnight ago, Datuk Ibrahim Ali flew back to Kelantan for the funeral of the Jelawat Assemblyman in Bacok.

There, the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department met another Umno wakil rakyat who handed him a cassette tape with the words: "Better do something about this ... a lot of accusations and very dangerous."

Ibrahim popped the item into his briefcase and it was only two days later, while driving in his car in Kuala Lumpur that he remembered the tape and decided to listen to it on his car stereo.

The tape - its clarity suggested an indoor recording - involved two speakers, one of whom spoke in a Terengganu accent.

The general contents, liberally sprinkled with verses from the Quran, were not exactly new: attacks against the Government, character assassination of Umno leaders - namely centring around the by now familiar litany of money, sex and abuse of power - and condemnation of the Anwar Ibrahim trial.

But there were some startling portions, namely calls for a military coup d'etat and for the Prime Minister to be killed.

"That really shocked me," says this arch loyalist of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The tape has since become a police case and Ibrahim himself is on the warpath.

"These people are kelas najis (excrement)," he says of those behind what he calls "lies and slander against our leaders".

"And we are going to sue them," he says in his usual high decibel style.

Umno already has a legal committee looking into this while another committee comprising party figures was formed recently.

So is all this politics as usual or is it something more serious?

The latest development is perhaps best described as the politics of fitnah-memfitnah or as Kelantan Umno politician Alwi Che Ahmad puts it, "kempen membenci" (hate campaign).

"Slander in Kelantan politics is not new. The only thing new is the threat of killing people," says Alwi.

Malay politics, a journalist colleague suggests, has reached a new level of frenzy. "I accuse you, you accuse me ... it's sickening," he says.

There seems to be two levels to this slanging match: a direct clash between Pas and Umno at one level and, at a broader level, it is taking place between the pro-Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim/Reformasi supporters and the Government.

The mainstream media insists it has a responsibility to maintaining political and economic stability in the country.

But the Reformasi group accuses the mainstream media of bias and untruths and has resorted to the Internet and Harakah to say its piece.

But if the average news seeker is expecting a balanced version of events and issues in what has been touted as the "alternative media", then he is in for a surprise.

The pro-Reformasi websites carry a great deal of stuff one does not get in the mainstream media. But they also tend to be fiercely partisan and involve more name-calling, allegations and insults than one might find anywhere else outside the Internet.

Thus, even as they accuse Dr Mahathir of making outrageous claims against Anwar, they are retaliating with equally, if not more outlandish

accusations, against government leaders.

It is a situation best summed up by the Malay saying: Kata dulang paku serpih; mengata orang, awak yang lebih (roughly translated: The accuser is worse than the person slandered).

There seems little room for the middle ground in contemporary political discussion; one has to be for or against.

Anwar's supporters find mainstream journalism uninspiring, one-sided, disgusting even, but they themselves seem to find it difficult to be different.

An example of this is to be found in the Information Ministry's Cetusan Rasa website (kempen.gov.my) where postings range from the absurd to the obscene and racist, with little else in between.

Prime targets are Dr Mahathir followed closely by Datuk Ibrahim Ali, Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, Datuk Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayop and Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik. The rest of the Cabinet and Umno supreme council members get it now and then.

At best, the Cetusan Rasa postings are a form of melepaskan geram or letting off steam: at worst, they are a tragic reflection of the Malaysian critical mind.

But that is not to say that there aren't websites that offer intelligent and stimulating discussion.

There are, and one of the local best is probably saksi.com, also a cyber by-product of last year's political upheaval.

Saksi's articles are intelligent, well-written and well-presented. It's writers are also honest enough to strike the middle ground when they have to.

Thus, while Saksi is critical of Dr Mahathir and many of the BN's policies, it does not, as in the case of many pro-Reformasi sites, suffer a memory loss about Anwar's past faults.

This malady is particularly prevalent among Pas leaders for whom the Anwar issue has presented a unique opportunity for political power.

For instance, Pas Youth figure Mahfuz Omar who had - as a Pas candidate in the 1990 general election - campaigned with great zeal against Anwar in Permatang Pauh, is now an Anwar defender; and he will probably make it this time if he is picked as the Pas candidate.

Likewise, a great deal of Harakah's political focus is on criticising the other side, pointing out its faults and highlighting the support that Pas currently enjoys among Malays.

A recent issue, for instance, urged Malays to spread the word about the "tyranny of the BN" when they balik kampung for the Idil Adha today.

And considering the party's flourishing ambitions, Harakah has done little in the way a Pas government has to offer the general Malaysian population and even less on what an Islamic State will mean for everybody.

Pas people insist there is nothing strange in the war of words with Umno.

"It's not disunity of the ummah. It's just politics," says Wan Abdul Rahim Wan Abdullah, organising secretary of Kelantan Pas.

Besides, says Abdul Rahim, all that is taking place now is "godsend".

"God is still looking after Anwar ... just as he was taking the last step to the top, God pulled him back ... you know, like enough is enough. Also, political parties and NGOs are now working together like it should be ... all God's will."

Presumably, what he means is that Anwar has been saved from the clutches of Umno and delivered into the hands of Pas and other groups.

And, he adds, if Harakah is one-sided in its reporting, it's because "we are seldom reported in the papers".

Acting Umno Youth leader Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein also seems to have

reached that point of enough is enough and is actually considering redress through the courts.

The reason: "Tapes of supreme council meeting get leaked out and doctored, Harakah coming out with all sorts of things and the fact that people are even talking about killing our leaders ...

"My grandfather left Umno and my father died outside Umno but never once did they think of inciting people to kill. Things have reached the stage where there's no more sense of right or wrong.

"They've gone too far and if we allow it to go on, it will discredit the institutions."

The Umno sense of outrage over the assassination tapes are inversely matched by the sense of scepticism on the part of Pas.

Its president Datuk Fadzil Noor has dismissed it as a political gimmick while Abdul Rahim says the opposition is not interested in assassinations because "Dr Mahathir is of more value to Pas alive".

And despite the controversy over the Internet, very few want to see any form of censorship imposed.

"People can tell between what is fair or unfair reporting in the media ... I think they can do the same on the Net," says academic Dr Rahmah Hashim.

Says Gerakan's Dr S.P. Choong: "The established view that governments are the authority on what can be read or heard is changing and any country going into the next millennium should start facing up to it."

The Internet is also a good indication of the emerging political state of mind of younger Malaysians, says a Malay lawyer.

"There is a lot of absurd nonsense. But I have also read persuasive discussion and criticism which I think are well-deserved ... because there is now this massive gap between what some politicians think constitutes politics and the actual reality of politics today."

This gap has to be addressed, says the lawyer, in order to re-involve the younger generation in politics, to force the political dialogue to move on and to facilitate the change.

Those for the Government think it is now up to Dr Mahathir to oversee the change and to implement it. Those against want to see a change of Government.

The pro-change people point to the numbers who turn up for their street protests, the surge of new membership to Pas and the high sales of Harakah.

The pro-status quo group claim the silent majority is on their side. The silent majority, they claim, are basically middle-of-the-roaders who are cautious of the unknown and who will need much more convincing before they can even begin to come around to the Pas point of view.

But which side commands more support remains debatable. The escalating politik fitnah-memfitnah is but an indication of how determined both groups are about political power.

And the question is best settled at the ballot box.

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