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The moral conflicts in issue of amendments to Kelantan Constitution

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IF there is one week in contemporary Malaysian history that can be declared as a "political week of the year", it has to be the past seven days.

First, there was the MCA internal squabble over the purchase of Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press newspapers which threatened to split the Chinese-based political party.

That matter seemed to be resolved on Sunday after its extraordinary general meeting.

In the meantime, Umno, which had for the past three years undergone much self-criticisms, seemed to be rejuvenated by Saturday and, going by its annual general assembly, was ready to reclaim pole position in the nation's political race.

If the activities of these two leading parties were not enough to whet the appetite of political observers, Parti Keadilan Nasional decided to hold its meeting the same weekend and to go ahead with the planned merger with Parti Rakyat Malaysia.

As if it did not want to be left out in the week of "political celebrations", Pas too joined the fray when its Kelantan chapter decided to change the equation in the State Government/palace partnership.

If the MCA conflict is a new development, the Umno assembly an annual one and the Keadilan/PRM merger a political necessity, then the Pas foray into the domain of the Kelantan palace is actually a protracted uncertainty and expected to continue to be so.

In fact, of the week's "political celebration", it is the Pas/palace issue which has the most baggage, be it in the past, present or even possibly, in the future.

It is only expected as the palace is in itself a historical baggage.

The Kelantan palace has enough contemporary history without having to search deep into the past to discover its lustre.

In fact, the Kelantan palace has been accused of being part of the state political equation from the time Barisan Nasional was the ruling party, and especially during the tail end of the coalition's grip.

After BN lost the state in the 1990 general election, there were numerous accusations from Kelantan Umno of palace interference in the state's political evolution.

It was quite easy to accuse the palace of it, given the fact that the then president of the now defunct Semangat 46 was Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, uncle to the ruling Sultan.

The accusations ranged from the palace openly showing its leaning towards Semangat, which was an ally of Pas, to the state civil service which was controlled by the palace, of being used as a tool to oppose Umno and its programmes.

The disenchantment with the palace reached a high when the Federal Government embarked on efforts to remove the Malay Rulers' immunity in 1994.

The Kelantan palace refused to agree to amendments to effect the removal of the immunity. Semangat and Pas defended its decision.

However, after the 1995 general election, the relationship between Semangat and Pas soured, and the following year saw the former dissolving its party with members joining Umno en bloc.

With that, relations between Pas and the palace became quite strained

and some of the state Pas leaders started proposing amendments to limit the powers of the Sultan.

On Monday, the Pas state government finally made good its threat. Mentri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat tabled the amendments which, among others ensured Bills become laws after 30 days with or without royal assent and that the Sultan must act on the advice of the Mentri Besar.

There are questions raised by certain quarters over the legitimacy of the tabling of the amendments which, in effect, were merely adopting the provisions in the Federal Constitution.

While debates over whether the amendments were constitutional or otherwise would continue, it cannot be denied that the spirit of the amendments is consistent with that of the Federal Constitution.

The only problem to the whole thing is that there are moral conflicts on both sides - Nik Aziz and the State Government he leads and those who oppose the amendments.

For those, especially the ones from BN and Umno, to oppose the Pas-initiated amendments is almost like going back on their own word.

After all, they were the ones that convinced the citizenry on the need for these amendments to the Federal Constitution to ensure that the Malay Rulers truly act as constitutional monarchs.

They argued that the amendments were necessary to ensure that the Rulers' institution remained relevant to the nation's political evolution.

As such, to oppose the amendments tabled by Nik Aziz would be a volte-face of sorts on the part of BN and Umno leaders.

Pas leaders and Nik Aziz cannot ride the moral high horse either and cannot be absolved of their past "sins" when it comes to the position of the Malay Rulers.

When the Federal Government moved to amend the Federal Constitution, Pas leaders, including Nik Aziz, accused Umno and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad of "usurping the power and immunity" they had stripped the Rulers of.

These Pas leaders stood by Semangat's side to condemn the Federal Government's move to push for the amendments and words like "unconstitutional" and "destroying the Rulers's institution" were among the terms used to justify their opposition.

But now, since Nik Aziz found it necessary to make the amendments, all the justifications Pas had used against the Federal Government when it was pushing its own, no longer arise.

In fact, Nik Aziz is using the same justification used by the Federal Government when tabling the amendments at the state assembly.

Of course, for a more trivial, though not necessarily less pertinent, comparison, the reasons for Pas pushing for the amendments do seem petty as compared with those of the Federal Government's.

One of the reasons which compelled Pas to push for the amendments was the Sultan's withdrawal of awards conferred on two of its state leaders.

BN and Umno can take pride that it had the vision and moral conviction to push for the amendments much earlier, and Pas had to follow its lead much later under dubious circumstances.

Pas on the other hand, should probably take a leaf from this episode and realise that opposing just for the sake of opposing only serves to prove that it lacks political wisdom.

But one thing is for sure, the Kelantan palace is no mere pushover and has always been acknowledged, in its own right, as a political force in the state.

If it comes to the crunch, the battle royale is something Pas and Nik Aziz will have to deal with.

But it will be one royal event without a yellow or red carpet being

rolled out.