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Wrestling with suspicion

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THERE are two types of wrestling fans among the Malays. One views it as another source of entertainment, like watching a movie or a television series, and is aware that all the actions are choreographed for maximum impact.

The other takes these programmes as a real-life sporting event in which the wrestlers are truly engaged in life-threatening physical contact. A colleague quipped about the second group:

"It is truly baffling how these Malays can believe that the fights are real. Try telling them that the whole scenes are scripted and choreographed and they will snap at you.

"Not surprisingly these are also the same people who distrust everything the authorities do, suspecting every move of having a sinister motive, and who are the greatest believers in conspiracy theories."

A generalised observation, but there is a lot of truth, in that, many a Malay mind does suffer from the dichotomy of either swallowing everything wholesale without a shred of doubt or of being suspicious of everything, even the batting of an eyelid.

Actually, suspicion is the underlying reason which has made it so difficult for Umno and Pas to realise the Malay unity talks.

Arrogance and the sense of political superiority are other reasons.

Given the way things have evolved since the idea of the talks was mooted in December last year by Universiti Utara Malaysia's deputy vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Fawzy Basri, it truly seems to have reached a cul-de-sac.

The proposal started off on a good note when Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took up the idea positively.

Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor responded likewise, and both seemed to agree that the talks could be held provided neither Umno nor Pas set conditions.

The only request was made by Fadzil, that the talks be expanded from Malay unity to national unity.

Everything was geared for a historical meeting between Dr Mahathir and Fadzil, with both Umno and Pas technical committees meeting on Feb 8 and Feb 16 to consider the logistics and issues to be discussed between the party leaders on Feb 19.

Then on Feb 18, the Pas central working committee decided that the meeting should be postponed, and made three demands which Umno had to fulfil before Pas would agree to the talks.

Pas wanted restored its rights to publish Harakah, its official newsletter, twice weekly instead of twice a month; the return of cash payments for petroleum resources to the Pas-led Terengganu government; and the right for political parties to use the word "Islam".

These pre-conditions may have sounded the talks' death knell.

The demands reinforce the fact that they arose out of suspicion.

There was suspicion from the party's leaders and suspicion from the party's supporters.

The leaders feared that in the meeting with Dr Mahathir, Fadzil would be "trapped" into agreeing to things which would harm Pas politically.

Pas supporters were trapped in their hatred and hostility towards Umno.

But it was difficult for Fadzil and the rest of the Pas leadership to say they were not interested in the talks as they had given their

commitment to it. Further, Pas had, in the past, requested for muzakarah (discussions) with Umno.

So, what was the best way out of this dilemma?

Simple. Set pre-conditions which would make the party leadership popular with the supporters.

If Umno agreed to the pre-conditions, then Fadzil and the other Pas leaders would come out smelling like roses in addition to having scored brownie points with all the supporters even before the meeting.

It would have worked, too, if Umno had acquiesced.

But it didn't.

Umno and Dr Mahathir were clear about what they wanted from the talks with Pas.

Holding a Press conference at Putrajaya on Thursday, specifically to explain Umno's intentions, Dr Mahathir outlined four points.

He hoped that his meeting with Fadzil would allow the two Malay-based parties common ground to protect Malay rights, Islam as the national religion, Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and to uphold the position of Malay Rulers as Constitutional Monarchs.

Dr Mahathir argued that the need for common ground was necessary since some quarters had started challenging these aspects which are enshrined in the Constitution.

While not revealing who was challenging these constitutional provisions, he may have been alluding to the demands by the Chinese group Suqiu.

Though Suqiu has set aside its demands, it was obvious then that the split between the Malays had prompted others to seize their opportunity.

Pas secretary-general Nasharuddin Mat Isa agreed that these points were important, but nonetheless brushed them aside as "nothing new".

Said a political observer: "If Pas is not suspicious about the whole thing, then it can take the proposal from Dr Mahathir as something not only important to Umno but also to Pas.

"When Dr Mahathir said the Malay political parties must have a common ground for these matters, it was basically to establish a clear agenda for any Malay political party to pursue when they are in power.

"That includes Pas. If Pas gets to take over the country's leadership, it must ensure that these constitutional provisions are defended, and Umno, as an Opposition party, must support Pas on this.

"Similarly now ... Umno and Pas may fight each other in an effort to gain political dominance but when these provisions are being challenged, they must collectively defend them."

All these points actually go back to the Suqiu's 17-point demand which was clearly attempting to push for the re-structuring of Malaysian society which, directly or otherwise, affects the constitutional rights of the Malays.

If Pas does not see the protection of the rights of the Malays, Bahasa Malaysia or the position of the Malay Rulers as part of its *raison d'etre*, surely the demand that all religions in the country be allowed equal right to propagate is something right down its alley.

After all, Pas has been pushing for more stringent laws on apostasy.

Equal rights to propagate means other religions have the right to propagate their faith to Muslims, unlike the present practice whereby only Muslims have the right to propagate Islam to those of other faiths.

Actually the demand is democratic in essence, but the issue here is that it has been Pas which has been getting all worked up over the alleged conversion of Malays to other faiths and condemning the authorities for not taking stern action against these apostates.

Wasn't it also Pas which believed that apostasy should be punishable with death?

What is it exactly that these leading Malay political parties want with the existing constitutional provisions pertaining to the Malays and Islam as the national religion?

Surely, Pas, in its eagerness to win non-Malay votes, is not ready to compromise these provisions.

But its show of support for Suqiu when the group made its demands does raise doubts.

As such, a meeting between Umno and Pas to trash out their differences over these provisions and find a common ground for them would be able to get the Malays out of their dichotomous existence.

Alas, there is too much suspicion between one Malay and another.

That being the case just let them get back to the wrestling matches, be they from the World Wrestling Federation or the World Championship Wrestling.

Believe everything that they see.

After all, these programmes are produced by the Americans.

They have to be good and beneath suspicion.