

29/09/2002

Tongue-biting the best policy

Shamsul Akmar

THE story Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat narrated to explain his recent slip of the tongue has all the ingredients of an enduring local political folk tale in the making.

It was well told, and coming from a man of Nik Aziz's stature the tale had it all - humour, tragedy, human error and a tinge of divine retribution.

According to the Kelantan Menteri Besar, it was a slip of the tongue which led him to say that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad did not know how to recite the Quran.

Nik Aziz explained that what he actually wanted to say at the recent ceramah in Bachok, Kelantan, was that Dr Mahathir did not know Arabic.

"I thought of one thing, but something else came out of my mouth," he said on Wednesday.

Following that "slip of the tongue" several Umno leaders, including Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, urged Nik Aziz to apologise, and on Friday the Pas leader said he would.

But Nik Aziz also took great pains to further explain how he had been afflicted by that "slip of the tongue".

He said he was still drowsy when he delivered the ceramah, having been suddenly awoken from the deep sleep he had sunk into due to exhaustion.

"To make matters worse, I was worried; it was raining and I am quite susceptible to cold and cough in such weather. Given my anxiety over the rain and being drowsy, things which should not have been said came out.

"I am sure you will understand the state of my mind then," he told reporters.

As it is rare for top politicians to apologise and admit their mistakes, Nik Aziz's gesture should herald a new era in Malay politics.

Zulkifli Sulong, editor of Pas official newsletter Harakah said: "That is the Tok Guru for you. Nik Aziz is not one who likes confrontation."

Nik Aziz has been embroiled in several controversies for things he's said.

The more infamous one was his contention that God too mencarut (utters vulgarities) when he was asked to comment on the book Shit by National Laureate Datuk Shanon Ahmad, which was filled with vulgarities directed at Dr Mahathir and other Umno leader.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib was, however, sceptical about Nik Aziz's preparedness to apologise over his latest remark.

"If you go by the track record of Pas leaders and Nik Aziz, they have been afflicted with the 'slip of the tongue' syndrome all the time.

"Remarks that God mencarut and God is samseng (a thug) are what Pas leaders do best.

"Let's not forget all the other maki hamun (cursing and foul language) Pas leaders have uttered against us. Are all these 'a slip of the tongue'?"

Muhammad said if it was not Nik Aziz, then it would be some other Pas leader doing the same to political opponents.

What Muhammad said is not far from the truth.

Apart from the Nik Aziz issue, Bachok Pas leader Buniyamin Yaakob is facing a trial for allegedly saying that the Prime Minister watched pornographic movies with his grandchildren.

The next question is, why is Nik Aziz prepared to apologise and admit his mistake over this issue and not the others?

Nik Aziz said he did not mind apologising when he was wrong.

"I will admit my mistake. But if I am right like in the samseng issue, I will do my best to defend myself," he said.

It makes sense but Umno's Muhammad is the least convinced.

"Nik Aziz knows that in the other issues, he can manipulate Islam to justify his arguments. In this case, he knows he cannot defend it. If tomorrow, Dr Mahathir appears on TV and recites Quranic verses, what is Nik Aziz going to say?"

Muhammad said the move by Nik Aziz was clearly an attempt to wriggle himself out of trouble as he only admitted the mistake and offered to apologise after someone lodged a police report.

But observers believe Umno leaders should not be too quick to capitalise on the issue of admitting to his mistake.

"The public, especially the Malay Muslim community, will see Nik Aziz as a leader who is humble enough to apologise and the situation which led to the slip of the tongue will draw sympathy. If Umno leaders start picking on him, the sympathy for him will grow," said one observer.

Another concurred, arguing: "The public will forget the nasty things Nik Aziz and other Pas leaders have said before and will confine their assessment to the latest issue."

It is quite easy for Umno leaders to fall into the trap.

After all, said an analyst, the past three years have seen Umno leaders subjected to nasty remarks from top Pas leaders during ceramah to mid-level leaders during sermons to ordinary members at the kedai kopi (coffeeshops).

"And if some overzealous Umno men go overboard in their condemnation of the issue, then the wheels will turn.

"It will be Umno men who would now be perceived as the aggressors who use nasty and foul language to attack Pas.

"And the confusion among the Malay Muslims over values will prevail."

Muhammad said the confusion would prevail because Pas flourishes in such a situation. "As long as the Malays are confused over what is the right value, the true Islamic teaching and way of life, Pas will benefit.

"The move by Nik Aziz now is further confusing the Malay Muslims. Why does he not admit in the first place that uttering remarks to undermine a fellow Muslim leader is wrong?"

The whole thing then goes back to the question whether it is truly Islamic to undermine the religious credentials of a political opponent.

An observer said all that's necessary is for Nik Aziz to stop running down his political opponents.

"The chances of Nik Aziz having another 'slip of the tongue' will be less."

Then, someone will probably ask - did the cat get Nik Aziz's tongue?