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Pas exploits English in schools issue to cause serious split in Umno

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A Welcome to Terengganu billboard in the state capital conjures conflicting images.

It has English and Arabic words but nothing in Bahasa Melayu, prompting Terengganu Literary Writers' Association secretary Abdul Mubin Ismail to rebuke Pas Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang.

His criticisms came about because Hadi had questioned the Federal Government's move to have Science and Mathematics taught in English.

Hadi saw the move as perpetuating colonisation in language and culture.

If so, then what he is doing is worse - he is perpetuating the colonisation of Terengganu by both the Arabs and English.

Of course Hadi can justify the need to promote Arabic.

It is, after all, the language of the Quran, and given the way Pas has been trying to be the sole representative of Islam in the country, promoting the language with such a big display might make the State look more Islamic.

That established, the only loose end is why is the Pas deputy president suddenly concerned with the emphasis on English in schools.

If anything, both Pas and he should be promoting Arabic, since they have always wanted the nation to be Arabised so as to be Islamic.

Even the latest edition of Harakah, the Pas official newsletter, joined the fray.

It front-paged a story that certain individuals from Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) are launching a campaign to collect a million signatures to protest against the move to have Science and Mathematics taught in English.

It is quite rare for Harakah to promote the views of individuals or organisations linked to Umno.

Obviously, they saw in the issue a chance to capitalise on possibly conflicting views within Umno.

It cannot be anything else because Pas, except when it was led by Malay nationalists until the late 1970s, had stopped being concerned with such issues.

All these Malay nationalism issues, described by Pas as assobiyah, have been Pas' principles since the advent in the 1980s when young turks like Hadi, who had styled themselves as Islamic revolutionaries, took over the party helm.

Pas' sudden interest in Malay issues can only mean one thing - it is another opportunity to get disgruntled Umno members to forge an unholy alliance in facing the common enemy, in this case Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and those in Umno who support him.

It is not a new phenomenon. The last one was when Pas and Parti Keadilan Nasional linked up to fight Umno.

The Malay issues do not fall into the same category as the split in 1998, no doubt, but they are capable of causing much damage.

It is an opportunity any wily political body would find too good to resist. So much for the aspect of Pas' involvement.

The next aspect is the battle within Umno itself, in which these Malay issues give an opportunity for ambitious members and leaders to undermine those at the helm, showing other members why changes in the party hierarchy are necessary.

With that, those in power may become defensive, and if political

considerations overwhelm the issue at hand, then the promoter of the policy may end up ignoring views which may be of essence to the implementation.

The widely debated issue of English in Mathematics and Science has reached a stage where the divide is simply a case of those for or against the implementation of the policy.

In fact, by now, it is doubtful that Umno leaders and members would dispute the importance of promoting English among Malay students to enable them to be more competent and improve their "market value".

Then why the debate over the need to teach the subjects in English?

Surely it should be on the methodology and whether the Education Ministry will be able to execute the policy on such short notice?

Another aspect is whether Malay students who have taken the said subjects in Bahasa Melayu until their fourth form can handle the change of medium.

They can also probably raise the question of whether it is necessary to make Science and Mathematics the subjects taught in English, or whether other non-core subjects be used for the initial implementation of the policy.

If these are the uncertainties among the grassroots Umno leaders, then it is not a question of opposing the emphasis on English in schools.

It is rather a case of wanting to be convinced that the Education Ministry has the resources to ensure the successful execution of the policy.

On that score, the vote of no-confidence by Senai Umno division against Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamed is truly unjustified because the decision was collectively made by the Cabinet and Umno supreme council.

Even on the issue of allocating a 10 per cent quota for non-Malays in Mara Junior Science Colleges (MRSM) as raised by the Senai Umno division sounds very petty when the policy has existed since the inception of the MRSM.

In fact, what is going on right now is merely the revival of the policy, which may have been ignored over the past few years.

It then becomes a case of pukul anak sindir menantu, simply meaning to hit at Musa when the target is actually the top Umno leadership.

The next question: Is there some-one baling batu sembunyi tangan, or a hidden hand orchestrating the whole episode?

Bottom line: The Malays, especially those in Umno, should tepuk dada tanya selera, meaning they should be searching deep within themselves for what they really want.

Surely, no giant billboard is needed to spell this out.

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