

11/01/2004

When national politics dominates small talk in hospital

Ahmad A. Talib

HOSPITALS can trigger all kinds of conversation. And speculations. I was at two hospitals for different reasons in the past few days where the conversation ranged from babies to treatment of pain in the neck, illnesses and party and national politics.

The appointment of Datuk Seri Najib Razak as Deputy Prime Minister on Wednesday topped the agenda in the waiting and treatment rooms.

In the Damansara Specialist Centre, at one of the posttreatment departments to be precise, I listened to patient-nurse talk which centred on health and then gradually moved to national politics. It occurred to me then that Malaysians certainly love their politics and even take them to hospitals.

I didn't know the two people in conversation because patients are separated by curtains as they receive their treatment. Patients only come to this department after meeting their physicians.

I had seen mine and was getting my share of neck traction and the like. Patients seldom know who is on the other side of the curtain, unless one makes an effort to find out.

I know it's bad to eavesdrop but it was impossible not to hear the behind-the-curtain conversation. The gist: "Wah! That Datuk Najib is going to be our new Deputy Prime Ministerlah! That's what the newspapers say. I think he has been waiting for a long time. Finally aah! I've been to his house one time at a Hari Raya open house. He's very friendly, and we had so much food. I like his house. It can take many people but the traffic jam was terrible. I think he's a very popular man ..."

If you think that national politics is only discussed at the Putra World Trade Centre, Putrajaya or hotel coffee houses, then you are mistaken. The comment from the other party behind the curtain was equally interesting: "Well, we have to wait for one more day. Tomorrow (Wednesday) is the official announcement. You know, many people were waiting when Pak Lah (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) would announce his deputy. I always knew it would be between Datuk Najib and our pirate CD chief inspector, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. I wouldn't have minded if the PM had picked Muhyiddin because he's from Johor. I'm from Johor, too."

Like it or not, the appointment of a Deputy Prime Minister has stirred up much interest in the country's administration. This has got to be good, compared to outright indifference.

People will take sides in politics, and most politicians take great pains to present their positive side to the people (read voters). Najib and Muhyiddin certainly have their share of followers and detractors.

At the Pantai Medical Centre, the waiting room on one of the floors was turned into a hall for a mini forum.

Fathers waiting for the delivery of their sons and daughters sat glued to the television. The prime-time news was that of the appointment of Najib as the deputy PM and all sorts of theories and countertheories filled the air.

For a moment, the husbands left the care of their wives to the gynaecologists and nurses. Top of their mind was national politics.

One man who drove his father-in-law to the hospital said he was not surprised that Pak Lah had picked Najib. When I asked why, he said: "He's young and strong, especially in Umno. He has plenty of supporters and they will now throw their support behind Pak Lah as well. Our PM is smart."

He also volunteered more views: "I like Muhyiddin too. But he is not number one on the Umno vice-presidential list. If Pak Lah picks Muhyiddin, what will Najib and his many followers say. And don't forget that Najib's name has been suggested many times by our previous number one, Dr Mahathir, now Tun Dr Mahathir (Mohamad). I hope everybody can now start work and stop lobbying.

"Don't believe anyone if they tell you there is no lobbying. My uncle is not holding big post in Umno but even he is going around the kampung bisik-bisik (whispering) about the candidates. I like politics, but I don't have the money to go into it. Also, too tiring lah! No time for family."

One of the physicians had a chat with me when he was leaving after seeing off his last patient. He said the PM could now start galvanising his forces for a general election campaign.

He believes that the election will be held in April, and may even be held together with the Sabah State election.

"I meet my political kakis regularly and one or two of them are very active. I'm a businessman-doctor. Once Pak Lah has appointed his deputy, I expect some real, serious political work to start. The election is next."

I recall a statement made by the Prime Minister. He had said that he would appoint a deputy before the general election. And he has done so now. Which is just what the good doctor predicted - the election is near.

The doctor-businessman says he tries to be apolitical but his friends were more inclined towards the "other side".

I don't know what that means but I guess it must mean one of the opposition parties.

He didn't want to elaborate and so he sped off to his next appointment.

My next appointment is some time next week. By then I hope my next exercise will help the healing and reduce the pain.

I hope I won't meet the patient who had loose bowels while undergoing