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Colourful nature of political vocabulary

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IN The Oxford English-French Dictionary, Abel and Marguerite Chavally said: "Each generation requires new 'current use' dictionaries, not only of its own language but still more definitely for other languages comparable with its own. New words appear on both sides. Old words take on in each tongue a new and unforeseeable colour and the equivalents of yesterday are no longer equivalent today".

This observation applies to Malaysia's politics. As a rule, all political language means more than what it says and a good deal of it is euphemistic.

But three words employed by three politicians assume "a new and unforeseeable colour", indicating that yesterday's meanings are no longer the same today.

These are Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat's usage of *samseng* (gangster); Kelantan Umno deputy liaison chief Zaid Ibrahim's *peteh keting* (sabotage); and MCA president and Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's usage of the word "resignation".

Nik Aziz caused a furore when he used the word *samseng* to explain Al-Jabbar, one of God's divine attributes.

His defendants explained that in the Kelantan dialect, the word sums up the meaning.

Those who cried foul over the alleged sacrilegious act are used to the literal translation of Al-Jabbar as strong, forceful or one who dominates.

But those exposed to Islamic literature, although averse to Pas politics, know they score no points by beating upon Nik Aziz on this non-issue.

The word is correct in the context of the scholarly expositions on God's 99 names such as Ibn Arabi's *Metaphysics of Imagination: The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, which also defines the attribute as the overpowering tyrant.

So now, *samseng* (tyrant or gangster) as used by Nik Aziz is not the same word that we know it for it has ascended a different (albeit spiritual) level.

Zaid's *peteh keting* is a plain case of a culturally-circumscribed language that, when injected into national discourse, reminds us of the much-neglected dimension of Malay inter-cultural politics.

The politics of culture has not been forwarded to explain, for example, Pas' hold in Kelantan or why some reject the politics of developmentalism (a pragmatic political outlook that emphasises an equitable share of the economic cake) in favour of religiopolitics.

But that is another story altogether.

Back to *peteh keting*. These are words that will probably stay in Malaysia's political vocabulary. Whether they assume "a new and unforeseeable colour" depend on how Zaid (and others of his ilk) navigate through this "small issue" of sabotage.

Sandiwara (used by the Opposition) and *wayang kulit* (used by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to describe Kelantan Umno's state of affairs) are adjectives that have gone beyond their traditional meaning.

Their usage suggests a largely unexplored dual structure in our political culture.

In Japan, for instance, the duality of political behaviour is well documented: *tatemae* (pretence) and *honne* (reality), *soto* (external) and

uchi (internal), omote (formal) and ura (hidden), kagemusha (dummy general) and kuromaku (behind the screen), ningyo (puppet) and kuroko (puppeteer).

Parliamentary proceedings is the omote (formal) side of the political process while lobbying for a particular bill is the ura (hidden) side. How much of this duality applies to our political process remains to be seen but there's nothing surprising about it, as pointed out by Walter Bagehot in *The English Constitution*: "It is needful to keep the ancient show while we secretly interpolate the new reality".

The questions surrounding Dr Ling's resignation have somewhat robbed the word of its innocence (by this, it means words that convey the meaning for what they are).

Call it a "ling-a-ling resignation", say observers. The circumstances? Dr Ling submitted his resignation letter to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Aug 15, 2002, which is to take effect on a date to be fixed by Dr Mahathir should he accept the resignation.

Those who love to dissect political language are somewhat challenged by the word. By assigning it to prime ministerial prerogative, Dr Ling has plumbed a new depth to its meaning.

A "resignation" implies the exercise of free will but it is not quite the voluntary or free act that we understand it to be. Now, it is subject to someone else's acceptance and by implication, non-acceptance means the resignation must be withdrawn.

Perhaps, there is an interplay of factors, the ura or hidden side of it.

Little notice is taken of the fact that by making an "undated" resignation inconclusive, Dr Ling has brought out a narrative on prime ministerial powers.

A constitutional analysis of the prime minister as the head of the executive shows that such powers include the power to hire, move and fire ministers, direct them, guide them in the performance of their functions, chair the Cabinet, determine Cabinet agenda and decide how issues will be dealt with in Cabinet.

True, the Prime Minister is *primus inter pares* or the first among equals. But so far, the prime ministerial powers on the appointment, dismissal and promotion of ministers do not touch on resignation, which is done on the person's own volition.

Unless, of course, Dr Ling's case is meant to add a new dimension to the scope of prime ministerial powers.

My former editor at *Malaysian Business*, Cheam Toon Lee, taught his reporters to be wary of "kite flying" (though he didn't specifically use this term), which is a form of manipulation where sources (underlings of politicians or corporate bigwigs) feed a misleading story that can be denied and subsequently, be used by the sources' puppeteers as a leverage to achieve a certain outcome.

But "kite flying" is also a political game.

Trust the politician, but bear in mind, political language means more than it says. Be it *peteh keting* or "I resign", such are the charms and challenges of Malaysia's political vocabulary.