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Renewing an old covenant

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ENTREPRENEUR Development Minister Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz's recent outburst, which saw the terms "political masters" and "government servants" being bandied about, provoked many reactions.

His tirade against the Anti-Corruption Agency investigations director Datuk Nordin Ismail raised interesting issues on relations between politicians and civil servants.

Nazri's detractors feel he was arrogant and still steeped in a feudal mentality.

His supporters think Nazri was right in stopping Nordin from threatening to use the powers accorded to the ACA to arrest him.

Nazri's supporters especially liked the remarks: "He (Nordin) has not done his homework and he is talking about arresting a minister. What is he trying to show?"

"Is he trying to show he has got more powers (than me)? We will see. I want to see him arrest me. Who does he think he is? He has no right to threaten a minister.

"Imagine if he can threaten a minister, what more he can do to ordinary people ...getting confessions, forcing them, beating them, threatening here, threatening there."

While Nazri may know something about the "nasty" manner in which he alleges the ACA operates, most of his detractors singled out his "political masters" and "civil servants" remarks as the main bone of contention.

To Umno supporters, their concern was that Nazri's outburst may distance the civil servants further from the party.

Said an Umno member from Perak: "Even though in reality civil servants should serve the Government, who is their political master, it is something that need not be said out loud."

To make things more interesting was Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's statement the following day when he described himself as the "number one servant of the nation".

Some read it as indirectly reprimanding Nazri, but insiders denied it, insisting that the remark was in line with Abdullah's pledge upon assuming the Prime Minister's office that he wanted the citizenry to "work with him, and not for him".

This should have some bearing on the affection or disaffection of the civil service towards Umno, as evidenced after the 1999 general election.

It was widely believed that a large segment of the more than 800,000-strong civil service turned against Umno and the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

It was quite a backlash, given the fact that prior to that, the Malay-majority civil service had always been perceived to be a powerful component in Umno's continued grip on power.

Until the 1999 election, it was also generally accepted that it was entrenched in the Malay psyche to remain loyal to the ruler.

The concept of Malay loyalty can be traced to the covenant of ruler-subject relations as expounded in the Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals).

Legend has it that the pledge made by Demang Lebar Daun to the mythical ruler Sri Tri Buana was: "Your Highness, the descendants of your humble servant shall be the subjects of your Majesty's throne, but they must be well-treated by your descendants.

"If they offend, they shall not, however grave be their offence, be disgraced or reviled with evil words: if their offence is grave, let them be put to death, if that is in accordance with the Syariah."

To this, Sri Tri Buana replied: "I agree to give the understanding for

which you ask: but I, in my turn, require an undertaking from you, sir."

And when Demang Lebar Daun asked what the undertaking was, the King answered, "Your descendants shall never for the rest of time be disloyal to my descendants, even if my descendants oppress them and behave evilly."

And Demang Lebar Daun said, "Very well, your Highness. But if your descendants depart from the terms of the pact, then so will mine."

And Sri Tri Buana replied: "Very well, I agree, I agree to that covenant."

This covenant has been identified by Malay scholars as the basis of the concept of loyalty to the Rulers.

However, the pledge of undivided loyalty to the Rulers as envisaged in the Malay Annals was challenged in the legends of Hang Tuah and Sultan Mahmud Mangkat Di Julang.

In both narration, their "uprising" was due to the cruelty of the Rulers.

While these are interpretations of the ruler-subject social contract prevalent in the 15th and 16th centuries during the feudal era of the Malacca Sultanate, much of the tradition of the Rulers being above the law prevailed even in post-independence Malaysia.

This contract was, however, challenged during the constitutional crisis of 1993 when Umno stood up against the Rulers for their excesses and abuses of power.

Prior to that, even though the Malay Rulers had been reduced to being titular heads, they had been known as "power brokers" who wielded much influence over the upper echelons of Malay society, hence the ability to "sweep under the carpet" any of their excesses and abuses.

However, the 1993 crisis, though it did not redefine their role as constitutional rulers, emphasised the fact that they were no more above the law and were reminded that their sovereignty came from the people and was not their birth right.

By this time, civil servants, except in Kelantan, were quite clear who their "masters" were and most were quite content to serve an elected ruler rather than a hereditary one.

This could be gauged from the strong show of support for Umno by the civil servants in the 1995 general election.

But in 1998, when Umno was embroiled in its internal crisis following the sacking of deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the civil service was divided.

Anwar supporters, in numerous postings in Opposition websites, used the Sri Tri Buana-Demang Lebar Daun covenant as the basis of their argument, painting then Umno president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as the ruler who had reneged on the social contract.

To them, the demonstrations and protests by proreformasi supporters were symbolic of an uprising against a cruel ruler.

However, such contentions were not conclusive, for if there were civil servants who supported Anwar, there were also civil servants who supported Dr Mahathir.

Yet, there was no doubt that the pledge of loyalty by the subjects to the political rulers was broken by a large number of civil servants.

Some even went on to desecrate the covenant by not only supporting the Opposition, but also by acts of sabotage, leaking the "secrets" of the ruling coalition and floating rumours.

That led to Umno and the BN suffering in Malay-majority seats where the civil servants used to provide them the winning edge. The emotional outbursts among the civil servants have, however, of late been more subdued.

Even if there is opposition to the Government, the situation has cooled down considerably unlike 1998 and 1999. Since then, Umno leaders have been making overtures to the civil servants.

Whether their efforts have been effective or not, the signs are that the situation has definitely not worsened.

With that, Umno leaders are hoping that the ancient covenant of the ruler-subject relationship can re-enter the Malay psyche.

It is not something difficult as Malay proverbs have a treasure trove of wisdom on what is expected of those in the position of power.

One is "ular menyusur akar takkan hilang bisanya" (a snake won't lose its poison if it slithers along the roots) which means rulers will not lose their powers by mixing with commoners.

The only problem is that some snakes have become too comfortable on the tree tops. They forget that it is the roots that are holding up the tree.