

24/06/2003

Truth can always be a stranger in politics

Rozi Ali

"KENAPA? Tidak percaya?" (Why? Don't believe?) retorted Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin in jest when pledging not to challenge anyone chosen as the deputy prime minister for the deputy president's post in Umno's next election.

Unwittingly, it poses the question of whether Muhyiddin had to wrestle with doubters. In declaring his support for Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's chosen one, Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak spoke of political deceit: "When the president (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) said there shouldn't be any contest, everyone clapped but those who clapped the loudest were the ones who goaded us to fight."

These anecdotes bring to surface the universal perception that truth is alien in politics. Having had presidents who lied to them, the Americans, the world's most liberated citizenry (so we are led to believe), will be the first to claim that in politics, lies and deception are tools of the trade.

In Malaysia's tradition of political thought, very little attention has been given to the function and understanding of the political lie. Mercifully, it may be because we have had little occasion to fall prey to the variegations of a political lie - illusions, distortions of public memory, deceptions and falsehood.

A politician who lies is not the same thing as a lover who lies or a parent who lies to the child. Political lies do not creep into politics by accident or by account of human weakness. Nor are they incidental. Crafted, manufactured and calculated, they are used as a legitimate means to achieve political ends.

As seen in the United States - be it over Johnson's Vietnam, Nixon's Watergate, Clinton's Lewinsky scandal and now, Bush's Iraq War - public moral outrage will not make political lies disappear.

The reality is that in politics, factual truths are never compellingly true. The whole texture of facts are vulnerable. Facts that we assume to be true are always in danger of being perforated by newly unveiled "facts", an alleged truth hitherto hidden, a change of mind and a single or "organised" political lie. In politics, a yes can mean a no. Stalin chopped off the heads of his most enthusiastic supporters because he figured out whoever says yes can also say no. Thank God, we do not have tyrants.

Was it a lie when Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim reiterated he would not challenge Tun Ghafar Baba for the deputy presidentship in the 1993 Umno election? Or was it a sincere change of mind when he withdrew it, citing that he could not deny the wish of the majority of Umno divisions?

According to a Malay daily, Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib declared his support for the deputy presidentship to be uncontested in the recent general assembly and said there was no "wawasan team" (the team aligned to Anwar in 1993 Umno election). The team had never existed, the daily quoted him. Whatever he meant, it illustrates the fact there is a certain fragility to the things we hold true.

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt said that "the story of the conflict between truth and politics is an old and complicated one, and nothing would be gained by simplification and moral denunciation". True. But worse, people often could not tell the distinguishing line between truth and falsehood - a case seen in those seduced by Pas' claim that those who

vote for the party of God will enter paradise.

History can be re-written again and again to tailor the "political fiction" of the present moment or purge the pieces that do not fit into the current picture. Such is the power of lies. I admire politicians who write memoirs and tell it as it is. You may not agree with their views but you appreciate the fact that they do not sanitise their memory and "defactualise" their world.

There are others who will write theirs only if so and so has come out with one. Should facts be contingent on someone's account? Likewise, there are speeches obviously prepared for public consumption while carefully making it credible (only the speechwriter can tell whether the words uttered are the man's own words and beliefs).

The American public is finding out that the First Amendment does not suffice to protect the most essential political freedom - the right to unmanipulated factual information, without which all freedom of opinion becomes a cruel hoax. Whatever constraints in our freedom of speech, we can be thankful that lying is not a government policy.

Washington's concealment of facts on the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was meant to deceive the public, the United Nations and the world. This official policy of "lying" and "deception" allows the shifting of imperialistic goals - war on Iraq yesterday, Iran today and, maybe, Syria tomorrow.

If lying has its place in politics, it is because a growing number of people think that half of politics is image-making and the other half is making people believe in the imagery. When politicians were told to go to the grassroots, they do so not to serve but to exercise their misguided belief that politics is public relations.

No lies were circulated in the 2003 Umno general assembly. But does this mean the end of phantasmagoria, or wayang kulit, for Umno?