

Dr M's soft-shoe shuffle on Taib ominous
Malaysiakini.com
April 16, 2011

COMMENT Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's precipitate change from admonishing Abdul Taib Mahmud on the lessons of history to expressing confidence in the Sarawak chief minister's ability to do what needs to be done must be ominous for Prime Minister Najib Razak.

It's no secret that Taib is fighting to stay on as chief minister no matter if the results of today's polls have it emblazoned on its entrails that he should go - and soon too, because Najib wants to call nationwide elections in which Taib could continue to be an albatross around the Sarawak wing of BN that he has been in current state polls.

Even seasoned observers of Sarawak politics were surprised at the speed with which Taib became the personification of all that was perceived to be wrong in the state in the opposition's campaign rhetoric in this election.

That was because when people become aware that things are generally wrong, they cotton to some shorthand of what those wrongs are.

The aura Taib has diffused around him in the last few years lent itself readily to this symbolic representation.

The presence of his young, exotic wife and of shadowy, vaguely sinister persons in his retinue, have conjured the image of the 75-year-old Taib as oriental potentate in dotage.

Taib's recently minted assurance that he has been grooming a successor for the past 20 years sounded about as credible as Mahathir's assurances when he was premier that his several deputies were going to succeed him.

It helps to remember that, in the end, the fourth deputy that actually succeeded Mahathir was soon cut down - albeit, not entirely, involuntarily - for good measure.

Albatross around Sarawak BN's neck

Taib has not so much been grooming a successor as he has been tantalising a slew of them with bait to keep them interested and subservient, the better he could prolong his tenure as CM.

Now he finds he has become an albatross around Sarawak BN's neck and soon, when Najib calls nationwide elections, a liability to the federal coalition, led by a reform-minded PM.

Taib would want to stay way past the time of the national polls, but this would be damaging to the federal BN if the Sarawak wing fares badly in today's polls.

Even if, improbably, it does well, a 30-year tenancy as CM is unjustifiably long.

A democracy, even the defective one that is Malaysia's, needs refreshment and replenishment of its leadership ranks at a rate that makes a three-decade tenancy at the top by a leader anomalous.

That is why Mahathir's weighing in with a soft-shoe shuffle in favour of Taib is ominous for a skipper wanting to shed excess baggage as he attempts to bring his gale-battered ship into port.

The conclusion is plausible: Not just Pakatan Rakyat is determined to see that a Najib-led BN does not do well in the 13th general election; others, supposedly rooting for him, are also not keen.

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/161685>