

Foolish and gullible
Malaysiakini.com
May 13, 2011

The Bible teaches Christians to be gentle as doves and wise as serpents. But in real life, followers of Jesus are easily deceived by illusive glories and a fake sense of assurance. Worse, many Christian leaders are perhaps more eager to be seen supping with those in high office rather than spending time talking to the down-and-out.

Just yesterday, a group of prominent Christians were invited to a closed-door meeting with Najib Abdul Razak. It would be more appropriate to describe it as an audience with the prime minister.

While both sides later claimed that the discussion had been fruitful, it does beg the question as to who will eventually come out victorious?

More than three years after the political tsunami of March 2008, Umno has yet to come to terms with its rejection by much of the electorate, and Utusan Malaysia continues to harp on racial and religious issues in an attempt to radicalise Malaysian politics to the point of no return.

For those who are still bogged down by the race-centric worldview of their own, Utusan is not only targeting the DAP and the non-Malays.

It is true that Lim Kit Siang, Lim Guan Eng, Teresa Kok, Karpal Singh and several Chinese Malaysian journalists have fallen victim to its relentless demonisation, but meanwhile Anwar Ibrahim, Nizar Jamaluddin, Nik Aziz Nik Mat and other Malay leaders are similarly portrayed as being 'anti-Malay', 'pro-Chinese' or 'Christian-friendly'. They are perhaps much more stigmatised than any others.

Simply put, Utusan is like a mad dog which cannot tell right from wrong but is only capable of recognising its own master, which is Umno. For the MCA and Gerakan to defend Najib by arguing that the Umno mouthpiece does not necessarily reflect the government's views is akin to a white supremacist in the United States denying having ever heard of the Ku Klux Klan.

The fact is, Najib may not agree with every issue played up by Utusan, he will not hesitate to cash in on it nonetheless should it turn out to be conducive to consolidating his position. The recent smear campaign against Anwar is a case in point.

Never in their wildest dreams

A Christian state? Never in their wildest dreams will Christian churches ever envisage one in Malaysia. The notion is theologically and biblically unsound ('my kingdom is not of this world' - Book of John, 18:36), and its implementation utterly provocative and dangerous in the context of the country.

Historically, states and empires - from the Armenians and the Roman to the numerous principalities across Europe - that had Christianity enshrined in their founding principles almost always ended up in incessant wars and destruction, a reason why the modern European nations nowadays jealously maintain a distinct boundary between state and religion.

The DAP is indeed politically ambitious. It aspires to capture more seats at the state and national levels in the upcoming general election in order to shore up its bargaining power. Being ambitious is not unethical, so long as one pursues one's goals with justice in mind.

The party may have been reckless at times, but to concoct that it had gathered Christian leaders to pray for a Christian prime minister clearly defies logic, especially when the opposition is facing an onslaught on all fronts.

Like a starving shark, Utusan smelt blood and readily picked up the unconfirmed blog reports. The backlash was so overwhelming that it finally forced Najib into damage control mode. Najib has always been a fence-sitter who constantly bids his time to exploit the situation.

The moment when PAS leaders resisted the temptation to play the role of an Islamic vanguard over the issue (which would well have tested their alliance with the DAP to the limits), Najib knew he could not quite gain mileage from it.

Conscious of the image that he himself and the mainstream media had carefully crafted, Najib had to look good in all this. So he hastily reached out to the Christian leaders, only to have them agree that they must not question Islam as a state religion. Did it never occur to the prime minister that no-one - at least not that I am aware of - has ever sought to challenge the position of Islam in Malaysia?

The crux of the matter was who had planted the vicious idea into the mind of Utusan's editorial team? And why it continues to enjoy the privilege of manufacturing news in a shameless and irresponsible manner? What has become of Najib's pledge two years ago to create 'a world-class, fact-based reporting and media that is fair and responsible to foster constructive debate about the nation's future'?

Most disappointing was the willingness of the Christian leaders to attend the meeting. They may justify it by saying that Christians are subject to the governing authorities and one should respect those in power. But a just God will certainly not have tolerated a government that is embroiled in scandals one after another and at the same time corrupt to the core.

'Qualified defender of the faith'

Najib's purpose cannot be more definite: he is only seeking the assurance that Christians will continue to respect Islam so that he can go back to the Umno grassroots and tout himself as a qualified defender of the faith.

One is not expected to demonstrate one's decency had one been law-abiding all along. Yet in Umno-controlled Malaysia, one is easily a sell-out, a doubter, an ingrate, and a potential saboteur of Islam in constant need of protesting one's innocence.

The voluminous controversies and the heightened religious scrutiny in the past two decades have proved categorically that no amount of closed-door meetings will satisfy those who manipulate race and religion to safeguard political dominance.

My conclusion? The Christian gentlemen have been led into an urn and now find themselves looking like fools. Naïve are those who still believe the Umno leadership is worth engaging. Or are they just dazzled by the split-second of glamour and fame?

JOSH HONG studied politics at London Metropolitan University and the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. A keen watcher of domestic and international politics, he longs for a day when Malaysians will learn and master the art of self-mockery, and enjoy life to the full in spite of politicians.