

**Najib on probation**  
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Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev once said politicians were the same all over because they “promise to build a bridge even where there is no river”. He could not have been more succinct and incisive.

The more I listen to Najib Abdul Razak, the more I become amazed at his audacity to fool his audience. The day before, the prime minister talked about why Americans should invest in Malaysia. Multi-ethnic populace, Malaysia truly Asia, blah blah blah.

On the same day, Malaysia fell six slots from 10th to 16th place in the 2011 World Competitiveness Rankings by the Swiss-based International Institute for Management Development

Prior to that, Najib had delivered a speech at Oxford University on moderation, abhorring extremism and terrorism. He tried to impress the listeners by saying that his government “advocates a path of Wasatiyah or justly balanced moderation whether in formulating and executing domestic policies or in conducting international relations”.

What the prime minister chose to leave out are of course a host of religious controversies over the last few years. He obviously pretended Utusan Malaysia - controlled by his own party - had never run sensational but fabricated stories on Christianity, and must have hoped that no-one in the audience would raise a hand as to why a pro-government lawmaker would continue to fight against his own shadow, even calling for a jihad!

How would a democracy put up with a leader that is so ambivalent on critical issues and often speaks with a fork-tongue? Yes, Malaysia boleh.

Why would a high-end investor consider a country where freedom of the press is severely curtailed, the judiciary opaque and untrustworthy, and corruption rampant? Little wonder Malaysia is now best known for being a low-end industrial nation, and may soon lose out to others in the region on cost competitiveness.

Why come all the way to invest in Malaysia only to realise one still has to import labourers from the neighbouring countries? One may as well go to Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia and Cambodia direct.

Or we simply turn our beautiful country into a gigantic dumpsite for heartless investors from the developed world such as the rare-earth processing plant Lynas of Australia.

When Najib ascended to the highest office, he had all the senior journalists that he could gather to polish for him and to sell his “ideas”. Like court jesters in the feudal past, these “media professionals” churned out one article after another to promote Najib as a man for reform, which delighted no-one but Najib, Rosmah Mansor and their cronies. More than two years have passed and the public has yet to see any institutional transformation in its real sense.

### **A fondness for mega projects**

Instead, Najib now appears to acquire Mahathir Mohamad's peculiar habit - a fondness for mega projects that is.

While Malaysian netizens are busy opposing the 100-storey complex, a new Felda headquarters is now being constructed near KLCC, to the tune of RM622 million. It will be 50-storeys tall upon completion to commemorate Felda's 50th anniversary, but I would rather think the government would win more hearts and minds by allocating the money to improve schools, clinics and other facilities in Felda estates.

A token of celebration? What would the government then do when Felda enters its centenary year? Another 100-storey building right in the centre of Kuala Lumpur?

More staggeringly, Tan Kee Kwong - a former deputy minister of Land and Cooperative Development - revealed that a sumptuous deposit of RM235 million had been paid even before the construction began, as part of an agreement reached in the deputy prime minister's office without the knowledge or the approval of the Felda board.

The secrecy surrounding the project speaks volumes of Najib's phoney pledge to create a clean, transparent and responsive government.

Like his predecessors, Najib's hands are bound in that he must dish out lucrative contracts in order to keep Umno warlords satisfied right through the next general election. By being reluctant to root out corruption and ambiguous about all the provocative remarks made by Perkasa and Mahathir, he now looks increasingly like Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

His failure to make an unequivocal stand on religious controversies can only be interpreted as condoning them, risking his dwindling goodwill with the non-Muslim masses who had hoped his premiership would usher in refreshing communal ties.

That was not to be. Najib does not even have the guts to cut the Perkasa-Umno nexus, knowing full well that Perkasa membership is largely made up of Umno grassroots. The prime minister need not go to the extreme of banning the "NGO" - which would run against the principle of freedom of association, but he should at least be bold enough to differ from it when the circumstances call for it. He never does.

#### **The weaknesses of the 'princelings'**

With Malaysian society imbued with heightened racial and religious sentiments, how can Najib boast about attracting quality foreign investors and making the country a welcoming destination is thoroughly perplexing, to say the least.

Cautiousness is noble as long as it is exercised with wisdom. Unlike Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim who have fought all the way up, Najib's owes his political career to his late father. He has therefore all the weaknesses that characterise the so-called 'princelings': indecisiveness and fence-sitting.

His prolonged dithering will likely aggravate the already dire straits and cost him the chance to be affirmed by the electorate. Should this come to pass, he will only be remembered as an apprentice who failed to qualify as prime minister.

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