

Tell-tale signs of dissent grow in BN
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COMMENT It's too early to say if these ripples of remonstrance will swell into a chorus of dissent.

Nevertheless, they are notable for the evidence they provide that things are not all a uniform "Aye, aye" from the BN ranks to the Najib Razak government's actions in recent days.

Sure, the doubts expressed by Saifuddin Abdullah (right), a deputy minister, about the government's heavy-handed reaction to the Bersih issue, and the call by S Subramaniam, a full minister, that the 'PSM Six', or the 'EO6', be charged in court or released are a long way from suggesting a growing schism within the BN ranks.

Still, Umno-BN has been such a predictable monolith when it comes to matters to do with the repression of the opposition that even a pipsqueak of protest from within the ranks must jog the attention.

When you add Saifuddin's and Subramaniam's murmurs of protest to Khairy Jamaluddin's challenge to the National Security Council to explain how they had come to view a progressive-seeming Islamic preacher as Wahabhist, you begin to infer a wider scale to the reservations about government actions from within its ranks.

Top that up with the presence of a sizeable number of BN types at the launch of Amanah (Angkatan Amanah Merdeka) last week by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, where nostalgia for the values of a benign past was easily translated into criticism of brazen current practices, you get the picture that the waters are beginning to roil under the surface of Umno-BN.

This trend of internal doubt and dissent is certain to escalate given what tends to happen to topnotch civil servants or public agency types who offer to explain government stances and actions at briefings or forums.

They are routinely embarrassed into silence, piqued by their audience's withering response to exposed gaps in their reasoning or explanation.

The latest casualty is the deputy chair of the Election Commission.

Some three weeks before it was his boss and a deputy director of the Special Branch who were chagrined by the reaction they encountered while explaining electoral rules and police investigations respectively at a briefing for a couple of NGOs.

Double deception

The failure of frontline troopers for the government casts a skeptical light on the advice of the Regent of Perak in a lecture he gave the other day on the need of rulers to be told the truth by officers.

Raja Nazrin Shah, once quite prolific in rendering discourses on public issues, appears to be returning to the public pulpit after a hiatus of two years following the disposal of the Pakatan Rakyat state government in Perak by the BN.

He chose as a theme for his return to the role as a sort of ombudsman of values that are under threat in the public arena to underline the importance of officers telling the truth to rulers so that the latter are adequately informed about public sentiment.

But what about the motives of officers in wanting to tell the rulers what they think they want to hear and, in instances, who affect to tell the public what they think their rulers want them to hear?

There is no insulation against this double deception except for the rulers to go incognito among the masses and find out what they feel.

This, of course, used to be practiced by some extraordinary rulers in times past but is no longer feasible in these days of pervasive media.

Hence rulers' reliance on their shock troops on the ground is de rigueur and the latter's accurate reporting of public sentiment is imperative.

Perhaps the theme of Raja Nazrin's next discourse could be on how rulers are to deal with troopers who themselves express doubt about the actions or conduct of rulers.

Would they react like King Henry VIII who decreed the capital punishment of his chancellor (prime minister in those days) after he had disagreed with the king?

The fate of Thomas More has resounded through the centuries as moral parable for the dilemmas inherent in ruler-officer relations.

Riding the back of the tiger

This brings us to the question of the incipient signs of dissent within Umno-BN ranks on the issues flaring in the national arena.

Some three weeks after the Bersih march, the divisive issues connected with it continue to smolder.

This is largely because the government chose to ride the back of the tiger on the matter and as all who have made that choice have gone on to discover, choosing when to dismount is never easy.

The arrest of 10 PKR members wearing yellow T-shirts in the attempt to hand over the Bersih memorandum to Najib at a public function yesterday only served to underscore the point about the government's Pavlovian reflex towards repression.

Brace, then, for an escalation to the tell-tale signs of internal dissent shown by the Saifuddins and Subramaniam of Umno-BN.