

The media as a monkey trainer
Malaysiakini.com
July 29, 2011

Towards the end of the Tang Dynasty, Emperor Zhaozong fled Chang An, the capital city, to avoid an uprising. Shorn of imperial glamour and feeling dejected, the emperor could barely eat and sleep at night.

Fortunately for him, among his dwindling entourage was a monkey trainer who had his pet kowtow to Zhaozong like a court official every morning. In doing so, he managed to bring smiles back on the emperor's face, and was awarded a fifth-rank position - complete with a red robe - in return.

When Najib Abdul Razak became prime minister in April 2009, the Chinese press - the Sin Chew Daily in particular - led the chorus of praise, seeking to project him as a "liberal" and "capable" head of government, Najib's dearth of accomplishments notwithstanding.

Tay Tian Yan, the deputy editor-in-chief who distorted an Economist report on social media recently, wrote of Najib as being "confident" and "adroit", while others commended the new leader for his "pink lips and white teeth" that made the rest of the nation "green with envy".

The extent to which these "senior journalists" went to eulogise Najib even before he had achieved anything significantly indeed put Utusan Malaysia and the New Straits Times to shame. How could the government-controlled media have been outdone by the Chinese press when it came to impressing the prime minister?

Najib could only be thankful for the servitude offered by the Chinese-language dailies at a time when his credibility and integrity were called into question by the tragic death of Altantuya Shaariibuu and the slew of scandals on his watch as defence minister.

Much like a court jester or the monkey trainer, these journalists were rather successful in making the distraught and weary Najib feel good with their subservient and flattering pieces. Whether or not any of them would one day be repaid with a datukship remains to be seen.

'Credentials' gone the morning after

Nearly two-and-a-half years after the curtain fell on Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, only one thing is certain: Najib has clearly failed to live up to his promises and now risks turning out worse than his immediate predecessor.

His handling of the Bersih 2.0 rally has been a fiasco, exposing thoroughly his indecisiveness and doublespeak on engaging civil society. That the government went berserk and fought left, right and centre over a peaceful protest only served to alienate the electorate further. Najib's "credentials" as a moderate leader were completely gone the morning after the rally.

The symptoms of Najib's losing control were already visible days before the fateful march (and the violent and excessive crackdown by the authorities) on July 9. Alarmed by the continued erosion of non-Malay support following the Sarawak state election, Najib warned that the Chinese must make a "wise" choice between the Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat or "face the music".

The apprentice prime minister who was once lauded as being "Chinese-friendly" now has no qualms about demanding the duty of gratitude, and must have regretted the goodies and overtures used to woo the non-Malays.

To consolidate the Malay constituency and perhaps to also placate the conservative forces within Umno, Najib suddenly talked of azlan "insidious" parties being out to "undermine" the country's stability and "colonise" the minds of spirits of the people. I can see Mahathir Mohamad nodding and grinning over his shoulder. Strangely enough, Lynas of Australia and other foreign companies that transfer environmental

hazards to Malaysia are welcome to poison Malaysians.

Since taking over from Abdullah, Najib has visited Sin Chew - arguably the most influential Chinese daily - and sat down with numerous Chinese Malaysian business and community leaders.

He even went as far as to entice the voters in Sibul in May last year with a RM5 million cheque. The promise to help was naturally not honoured after the BN lost Sibul to the DAP. It was a blatant bribe after all, and the MACC had to come up with a myriad of excuses not to look into the matter.

Now Najib wants the Chinese to be grateful because the government has allowed vernacular schools to exist. Why should they? As taxpayers, the Chinese - together with all other diligent and dutiful Malaysians - have the right to ensure the government of the day serve the people's interests.

Predicament becoming graver by the day

Instead of telling the nation to guard against "re-colonisation" and to demonstrate "gratitude", Najib must set an example by having the MACC investigate his and his wife's wealth. Why the need for a sizeable delegation whenever he goes on official visits overseas? And who footed the bill when his daughter got engaged at Putrajaya?

Najib's predicament is only becoming graver by the day. He rushed back to the country to "be with the rakyat" last Friday morning. Hours later, William Bourdon was set to be deported. Yet who let the French lawyer in and permitted him to have a field day speaking on the dodgy Scorpene submarine deal in the first place?

Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein had all the powers to save his cousin the nightmare by refusing Bourdon's entry from the very beginning, but the government's in-then-out treatment of the Frenchman has helped publicise the scandal in a way that Suaram could only dream of, just like the contradictory, illogical and ridiculous charges against six Parti Sosialis Malaysia members have only highlighted the party as being clean, caring and principled.

That Najib is increasingly isolated within Umno is beyond dispute, which explains why he is now ready to give up on his image as a "moderate" and play to the racist/nationalist gallery. A fence-sitter by nature, the princeling has no guts to confront the hawks because he believes he needs them for survival, not realising that he may end up being devoured in the end.

Outside Umno, the young generation of Malaysians are also becoming vocal, evidenced by their audacity to tell him to diam lah (be quiet). The police may charge them with "showing disrespect to the prime minister", but this is Malaysia, not Thailand where lèse majesté is arbitrarily applied. Remember: there is no provision in either the constitution or national law that forbids the people from criticising a head of government, and dissent is the highest form of patriotism.

Should Najib be eventually forced out, he would be distressed to know those "media professionals" who once praised him to the skies would begin to swear their allegiance to a new prime minister, leaving no jesters or monkey trainers to make his and his wife's day.

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