

Who's calling the shots: Najib or Muhyiddin?
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COMMENT One moment, the prime minister surprised almost everyone when he suddenly proposed to form a parliamentary select committee (PSC) to seek consensus over electoral reforms, in tacit concession to the heated demand spearheaded by Bersih 2.0.

But the next moment - barely 48 hours later - he backtracked by saying that there is nothing wrong with the present electoral system, and that he only proposed the PSC because the agitators demanded reforms.

Such a flip-flop coming from the flip-flop prone Premier Najib Razak (left) should not have raised any eyebrows, if not for the lightning speed with which he made the reverse turn in apparent deference to his deputy Muhyiddin Yassin who publicly contradicted his boss by saying that Malaysian elections have always been above board, and that the PM's proposed PSC is only for the purpose of fine tuning the electoral process.

This public statement from Muhyiddin on Aug 16, coming on the heels of Najib's PSC proposal only the day before, is a slap on the face of the latter.

Gallant attempt at electoral reform

When Najib announced the PSC proposal on Aug 15, there was no mistaking his sincerity when he said: "The committee will discuss all electoral reforms that need to be implemented in order to achieve bipartisan agreement without any suspicion that there is manipulation by the government."

Najib further stressed that his administration will not form the government unless it is truly elected by the people.

These are words that clearly admit the presence of structural flaws and that these flaws are serious enough to warrant the establishment of a parliamentary select committee.

And Najib's avowed intention to seek consensus and to govern only if "truly elected by the people" is further manifestation of the desire to right a wrong long overdue for correction.

In the face of such gallant and apparently serious attempt to restore some shine to our democracy to the approval of all decent minded Malaysians, Muhyiddin's daring contradiction of his boss almost in the same breath must have stunned many.

But what is even more shocking is that Najib made an almost immediate U-turn so as to toe the line of his deputy when he practically regurgitated what Muhyiddin (right) said about our electoral system being transparent and credible.

Speaking to a buka puasa function on Aug 17, Najib denied that the PSC proposal is an admission of any defect in our election system. He further said: "We will improve the election process, if it is disputed.

"We don't dispute it but to satisfy them, we will implement the changes to the system."

Such a wishy-washy statement does not befit a prime minister. If there is no fault, why reform? Making changes just because someone makes a complaint?

Hasn't the prime minister a stand and a conviction of his own? Forming a PSC is a serious affair that occurs rarely and only in the event of a grave issue that needs to be probed into deeply by Parliament.

It is the height of frivolity for the prime minister to propose such a solution to quell complaints against an

electoral system that in his opinion is perfectly sound.

Surely a man of the intelligence of the prime minister could not have meant what he said - forming a PSC just to silence critics.

Forced to make U-turn

Isn't it obvious that the PM has succumbed to the stronger will of the hardline DPM?

Looking back over Najib's two-year helm of the nation, one cannot help but lament that it is a premiership that started off with a bang but looking increasingly like ending with a whimper - not unlike the path trodden by his lame duck predecessor Abdullah Badawi.

His grand reforms sounded correct - political reform under the 1Malaysia banner to unite a fragmented people, and economic transformation through removal of race-based protectionism to revive a dormant economy - but a series of retreats in the face of recalcitrance from the conservative faction within his own party, Umno, have virtually reduced his so-called transformation to mere sloganeering exercises.

In the midst of such disappointments, his sudden nod to the much yearned for electoral reform was seen as a strategic move to regain the middle ground which would otherwise be irretrievably lost through his ill-advised repression of the the Bersih 2.0 movement, in particular, the cruel and totally unjustified crackdown on the July 9 Bersih rally.

All is not lost, however, if Najib can marshal enough courage to re-assert his prime ministerial authority to push through some meaningful reforms to an election system that has lost all credibility.

After all, the prime minister is fully empowered by the constitution to engage or dismiss his cabinet members, and any move of his towards restoration of constitutionality will surely be supported by not only the right-minded faction within his own party but will also be heartily applauded by all decent-minded Malaysians, including opposition members.

Honourable place in history

Correcting the wrongs of a flawed electoral system need not all be disadvantages to his party, as the rush of goodwill and respect that he will accrue through such a course of action (which will translate into votes in due course) may more than offset the anticipated loss of ill-gotten votes.

Besides, win or lose, Najib will have earned himself an honourable place in Malaysian history as the prime minister who restored democratic elections to his people.

He still has two years to prove his mettle, as the general election is not due until mid 2013. Why gamble away the chance to walk on the right side of history by rushing into a hasty election universally condemned as unfair and flawed, and risk losing everything - for himself, his party and his people?

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