

Najib's gaping void between illusion and reality
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COMMENT It's odd - this propensity of the Najib Razak administration to shoot itself in the foot just when it is poised to play the winning cards it intimates it has long been harbouring.

In this instance, the timing of the self-inflicted wound - the decision to charge Mohamad Sabu under the Penal Code with criminal defamation as a result of remarks the PAS No 2 made over the Bukit Kepong incident - is most inopportune.

The case comes to court just after the Attorney-General's Chambers dropped charges against a coterie of Parti Sosialis Malaysia activists who were initially indicted for offences under the hoary Emergency Ordinance and obsolete laws.

Also, the case against Sabu is being pressed when the prime minister's predecessor cautions him over the possibility of internal opposition to his liberalising laws curtailing civil liberties.

It is a measure of the silo-mentality of some Umno leaders that they are more concerned about internal reaction rather than public restlessness with a status quo that the Umno supremo is trying to change.

In other words, how Umno reactionaries feel matters more than what the public wants.

Najib's ballyhooed moves have attracted an array of ayes and nays from sceptics, with contention building over who should take the credit for the intended liberalisation, an exchange that mirrors the ongoing debate over which political forces were more responsible for gaining independence for the country in 1957.

With regard to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's caution about the likelihood of internal dissent, a Najib lieutenant has interjected to say that, perhaps, Abdullah lacked clarity about his own tilt towards liberalism, which was why, claimed Mohd Nazri Aziz, the former PM's attempt at 'perestroika' (restructuring of political discourse in Malaysia through relaxation of repressive laws) did not cut any ice with party reactionaries.

Talk about a lack of clarity about what liberalism ought to look like, what can be more addled than a decision shortly after liberalising measures were announced on prime-time television to prosecute ex-ISA detainee Mat Sabu for reason of his revisionist take on an incident that happened 61 years ago?

Form rather than substance

It has been argued in these columns that Najib knows the forms of liberalism, but not its substance, just as it has been suggested that he knows what 1Malaysia means - credit his 'We must embrace our differences' as having some worth - but does not know how to give effect to it.

The evidence of cognitive dissonance in the Najib administration is now too plentiful to deny.

From day one of his administration the PM appeared to want to smooth along nice and easy, with periodic announcements of changes to sclerotic policies and practices. But all the while his administration has been prey to jerks and twitches that throw it off-stride.

Out of this discontinuity between the reformist image he desperately wants to project and the reality that is considerably less amenable, the PM comes across as wanting the public to trust him.

Opinion surveys now tell him that the 'trust-the-PM' factor is slipping. Every new PM is given a wide berth by a watching public to strut his stuff, but once the people sense his act is tinsel, they can turn on the

leader with a vengeance.

Look at predecessor Abdullah's slide from conductor of the 2004 BN landslide to casualty of the 2008 BN debacle, all within the span of a term.

The resounding lesson of that precipitous slide: Don't backslide once you have campaigned on a promise of reform.

Conjuring tricks

The problem reform-seeking Najib faces in his party and the administration is the undertow of stale thinking that hinders ameliorative policies.

In such circumstances, the task of leadership is to transform the public understanding of national issues and on the platform that affords the leader must break through the gauntlet of obstacles made up of reactionary forces, interest-group power, public passivity or cynicism, and conventional wisdom.

Najib is unable to transform his party's and his administration's assumption that democracy must be tutelary and citizens are essentially wards and not free agents.

This is the obsolete thinking he has not been able to change as the clock winds down rapidly to when he must seek his own electoral mandate.

Even if he gets it, it will be a victory without drum rolls, a majority without a meaningful mandate. That is because he has not defined clearly what he wants to do with it.

He is, in the end, more interested in form rather than substance, in management than in leadership, in tone than in content.

He is like the avuncular man who comes to do conjuring tricks at a children's party who is then startled to discover that the kids have grown up and want something more elevating.

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