

Anwar freed is to Najib's advantage?

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COMMENT It's amusing to hear that the Najib Razak administration will get a lift from the acquittal of Anwar Ibrahim by the High Court on the Sodomy II charge.

If by a lift or a bounce, people mean that it would have been disastrous for the government if the Pakatan Rakyat leader were convicted, then what is meant by the good vibes for the opposite decision would be like, say, the situation in North Korea, where starving peasants would surely welcome news that the country's new leader has preferred negotiations to sabre-rattling against its neighbours.

When the choice is between the calamitous and the catastrophic, the former would clearly be preferable, especially to people who would suffer the brunt of the consequences from the latter choice.

If Anwar had been convicted, Malaysia would have been relegated further down the list of countries where criminal justice system is seen as bad and getting worse, with damaging consequences to its investment climate and deferment to its aspirations of becoming a high-income nation by 2020.

Umno-BN sliding back to its winning form?

Sure, the Najib administration's boosters, besieged by bad news stemming from a recent contagion of corruption cases, would latch on to Anwar's acquittal to portray it in the best light, while claiming that Umno-BN is sliding back to its winning form of yore.

This puts one in mind of the beauty competitions that British newspapers ran in the 1930s to boost sales, which prompted famed economist John Maynard Keynes to muse on how beliefs feed on themselves and become divorced from the underlying reality.

The competition required readers to pick six faces of women featured in the contest they considered the most beautiful. The winner would be the one who chose the six faces most popular with readers.

NONThe result, Keynes observed, was that the task was not to choose the most beautiful face, but the face that average opinion would think that average opinion would find the most beautiful.

Something like this attenuation from underlying reality is at work in the flurry of speculation that Prime Minister Najib Razak has gained a bounce from Anwar's acquittal, with which, presumably, he can leverage to victory in a general election he must call sooner or later.

Isn't the underlying reality something like what Penang Chief Minister and DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng had alluded yesterday - that our galloping national debt is threatening to reach levels that will soon bankrupt the country?

Isn't that what a Najib cabinet member, Idris Jala, posited last year, though he feebly retracted the prediction later the same year?

From the standpoint of looming bankruptcy, wasn't Sodomy II, now that it has issued in Anwar's acquittal, a luridly self-indulgent waste of scarce public funds?

If Anwar had been convicted, wouldn't that have led to an appeal process that would have taken up more time and entailed more expense, the protraction of a matter that from the start had a surreal feel to it?

The fact the accuser met up with Najib and wife Rosmah Mansor before filing a police report against

Anwar was enough to render the whole case suspect from the word go.

Differentiating between hallucination and reality

But the case was allowed to proceed over every legal challenge to its credibility posed by Anwar's defence, until the judge decided that residual decency required the defendant's exoneration.

Only those who find difficulty in differentiating between hallucination and reality would paint the verdict a triumph for Najib's supposedly liberal reforms.

The High Court's decision to acquit Anwar could more credibly be credited to the influence of a factor that is not always immediately obvious in the way it impacts decisions.

This is the size of the crowds that Anwar drew on his 18-stop campaign swing through nine states on the peninsula. The one he drew in Machang in Kelantan towards the end of last week was reputedly about 50,000. It must be remembered that the Chief Justice is from Kelantan.

Recall the five-member Royal Commission of Inquiry into the VK Lingam videotape, which premiered this month four years ago, whose recommendations were released after the general election of March 8, 2008.

Would the panel's recommendations that lawyer Lingam, a minister, a couple of retired judges, and former PM Dr Mahathir Mohamad had engaged in behaviour that was indictable been what they were had the results of the general election not dealt Umno-BN a severe jolt?

There was speculation, then, that the inquiry panel was emboldened to recommend as it did because of the way the polls reflected the people's desire for political and judicial reforms.

The panel announced its recommendations a few weeks after the polls. Sure, the recommendations were mothballed, but that it was a decision of the executive arm of the government.

If there is any winner in Anwar's acquittal, it is people's power. The evidence of popular aversion for his hypothetical conviction was seen in the massed attendance at his pre-verdict campaign stops.

Just as the larger-than-expected crowd at the Bersih rally last July made a telling impact on the government, compelling Najib to sue for reforms though in the end these were only spectral rather than substantive, the people's wishes as expressed at the ballot box and campaign circuit, matter hugely.

In the present context, to think that the Najib administration would get a lift from a court decision that preferred calamity over catastrophe would mean reckoning that the public are more gullible than really they are.

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