

Ah Jib Gor can't stomach the truth
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COMMENT The timing could not be more unpropitious.

Just when Prime Minister Najib Razak, fresh from what is said to be a bounce his administration received from Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy acquittal, was smoothing along projecting the impression he is a moderate and a liberal, reality intrudes in a disconcerting way.

A day after he ascended an international platform, called the 'Global Movement for Moderates', to push the cause of moderation in human affairs, Bersih chairperson Ambiga Seenivasan tells, with substantiation, a public inquiry that the PM threatened her over her espousal of the cause of polls reform in Malaysia.

najib abdul razak in perth chogm 1Last week, continuing to soar from the lift the Anwar acquittal supposedly had given him, Najib beguiled a lunchtime audience at a leading club in Kuala Lumpur with reminiscences of the past that must have spawned a warm glow for him as a sort of regular guy.

Again he was cruising along until a club member virtually asked him to recant an incendiary statement he had made about the need for BN to defend Putrajaya with their "crushed bodies" if need be against an opposition takeover.

It was a spine tingling moment which a nimble politician would have conjured away with a neat quip, turning embarrassment aside, avoiding hypocrisy, and moving business along perhaps without even having dealt with the substance of the issue.

But Najib wasn't able to do a Houdini. He clamped up and wafted away from the scene, leaving listeners with the suspicion that some of his faux pas were indeed Freudian.

Najib on the horns of a dilemma

Both reminders, from the Bersih chairperson and an impertinent club member, of the discontinuity between the image of a liberal and reformer that the PM wants so eagerly to project and the reality that is considerably less complimentary have placed Najib on the horns of a dilemma, with a high stakes general election imminent.

This is that Najib has now - after almost three years of his premiership where he is seen floating errantly in the sphere between a genuine desire for reform and a mere affectation for it - to show which side really owns him - his liberal, reformist side or his crudely political and, at times, demagogic one.

We hear pollsters say that the Najib brand is still popular among the electorate. Perhaps by this they mean that a new and managerial jargon-spouting leader is always allowed a certain amount of slack.

The problem is how much time will he allowed before the rope is pulled taut and is he asked to deliver.

The answer: not much given that every new PM wants his own electoral mandate and Najib has been in the saddle for nearly three years during which time he has jaw-jawed about reform and liberalisation but has not quite delivered.

Certainly, on two of the issues - judicial and electoral reform - the public wants some forward movement after having seen that on the question of the right to peaceful assembly, the PM's promised liberalisation did not materialise.

The Peaceful Assembly Bill 2011, passed by Parliament last month, was a sham, with the relaxation in the initially required month-long notice to police of intent to assemble a derisory sop to people wanting freedom to assemble.

Reforms too little, too late

Genuine reform is one thing; its pantomime is another.

Najib has been miming the pantomime of reform, as when he said that he wanted Malaysia to be the best democracy in the world.

But if the contours of the Peaceful Assembly Bill is a reflection of what he means by “best democracy”, then the PM’s notions of reform and liberalisation are not very different from what Bashar Assad has in mind for his regime in Syria - feints in the direction of reform to pull the rug from under the carpet of a raging movement for political change.

History is replete with examples of the failure of leaders who have tried to prevent a decrepit status quo from crumbling by ringing in half-hearted changes in place of substantive and necessitous reform.

The Mensheviks towards the end of Czarist rule in Russia in 1917 and the Abulhassan Bani-Sadr interregnum between the Shah’s departure and Khomeini’s ascent in Iran in 1979 come to mind.

Citing these examples of the inadequacy of too-little-too-late reforms by sclerotic governments facing popular reformist movements maybe overmuch given that the Czarist Russia and Pahlavi Iran were societies of the edge of revolution after long years of decadence, scarcely what, one might say, Malaysia is today.

But if one looks at the inventory of malfeasance over the past three decades, at least, of Umno-BN rule, the comparison with Pahlavi Iran is not overdone: as with the Peacock Throne so with Umno-BN rule - projects and edifices of grandeur attempted against a background of rampant corruption, a case of scintillating rot.

Najib has not much time to dither over whether he wants to be a Menshevik or a Bani-Sadr or a sweeping reformer.

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