

Najib's mea culpa: Too little, too late
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COMMENT Prime Minister Najib Razak presumably took a leaf from his across-the-causeway counterpart Lee Hsien Loong's book by apologising for past mistakes of his government in an effort to recover slumping public support.

Najib offered the apology on a campaign swing through Kedah last weekend.

Although the extent and content of the apology immediately stirred discussion and debate, the fact it was offered in the first place was enough to count as indicative of the PM's perception of his position and his administration's situation vis-à-vis the electorate.

With a general election said to be just round the corner, Najib is trying every which way to get voters to stick with his ruling coalition that is battered by scandals of a serial nature.

Singapore PM Lee (right in photo), who was not in a comparable plight, resorted to a similar attempt at ingratiation with the republic's voters on the eve of that country's general election last year.

It was a strategy that worked for him, though not for his team: candidate Lee scored 10 percentage points higher in the vote than the rest of his party's slate which fell to a level that was the lowest in the ruling PAP's history of participation in elections since independence in 1965.

Lee's apology provided a modicum of balm for the hurt of an electorate smarting from the government's better treatment of high employment-value immigrants over locals, but it could not stem a tide of resentment that saw the opposition post their best results in years.

Najib's apology is offered in circumstances much different to that faced by his southern counterpart.

Unlike Lee's PAP, which was not anywhere near defeat by the opposition, Najib's Umno-BN coalition is in mortal peril of an upset by the opposition Pakatan Rakyat, in the peninsula at least, though not in its strongholds of Sarawak and Sabah.

Corruption scandals and inept government have conduced to Umno-BN's parlous standing in the eyes of voters increasingly convinced that a change of government is imperative.

Hence, an apology by a PM who constantly holds out the promise of reform, is presumably aimed at telling voters that a government that acknowledges its blemishes would be contrite enough to remove them.

But as the Malay saying 'Cakap tak serupa bikin' (Talk is no substitute for action) holds, Najib's mea culpa would have to be accompanied by action to make an impression on the people.

Scratchy Najib-Muhyiddin duet

When challenged by the opposition to list the actions that the PM was apologetic about, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin stepped in, as is his wont, to quell the extent of the apology.

Muhyiddin was saying in effect that there was no need for BN to engage in public self-flagellation; an apology was a sufficient earnest of the ruling coalition's desire for self-improvement and reform.

Throughout the three years of Najib's administration, the character of his tenancy has been the same: the

PM is allowed to determine the labeling of an intended raft of reform measures, but it is his deputy who determines their true import.

Hence it was not surprising that after Najib had elected to issue a public apology for BN's past record, it was Muhyiddin who stepped in to quell any notion that deep remorse would issue in radical measures towards improvement.

Thus the one-step-to-the-fore, two-shuffles-behind character of the Najib-Muhyiddin duet of governance continues unchanged.

It is a scratchy duet that the PM's vacillations ensure it will stay in place until he can dispose of the implied threat to his tenancy of the No 1 position in his party posed by his deputy.

There was a time that contest was the most significant election in the country. The general election was the preamble before the finale of the polls to the top-tier of the Umno leadership.

Not anymore. Though the looming contest between Najib and Muhyiddin is critical to deciding Umno's directions in the second half-century of Malaysia's independence, it has been reduced to a sidebar - the upcoming 13th general election of the country raised to its proper and pivotal importance in determining the nation's fortunes.

In a sense, the Umno internal polls supersession of the general elections' significance as a bellwether was a distortion that was emblematic of all that ails the country.

It represented the supersession of national considerations by essentially sectarian ones.

Hence its restoration to its proper size and importance is one of the several benefits - the incumbent PM's apology is only the latest - stemming from the results of the political tsunami of March 2008.

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