

Dr M takes self-parody to farcical levels

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COMMENT A good two decades back, the emcee at a community building function had guest of honour MIC leader S Samy Vellu humorously in his crosshairs when it came time to introduce him to the audience.

The master of ceremonies announced that the next speaker for the evening had once been a news reader on TV which Samy was in his salad days. The emcee proceeded to enact a cameo of Samy as news reader offering the top items of that day's bulletin.

He pronounced the leading story as that of thieves having broken into the MIC headquarters and stolen the results of the party's election scheduled to be held the following year.

The audience, sportingly joined by the target, guffawed at the emcee's attempt at twitting the MIC supremo's ingrained trait: lordly presumption.

As after dinner amusements go, about the time that Samy Vellu was being made the butt of amiable banter, then prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad was guest of honour at a dinner in Singapore for post-war alumni of the King Edward VII College of Medicine, which became the medical faculty of Universiti Malaya.

A titter of laughter ran through the audience composed of his former batch mates when Mahathir, in wisecracking form on the night, told them he no longer practised medicine, except occasionally on "my unsuspecting cabinet colleagues".

Attempt to invent a new reality

Incidentally, lordly presumption, devoid of irony, about election results and quackery, minus the playfulness, over what ails the country are on arched display these days as the retired PM gazes at his crystal ball and sees things he surely does not like.

What, then, does the self-elected physician of the national estate propose to do?

It's what autocrats are wont to when they don't like the reality they are faced with: invent a new version of reality and incant imaginary nostrums over the corpse they have made of the actual one.

This time, however, the country is no longer "unsuspecting", like the former cabinet colleagues of Mahathir's after-dinner joke.

By claiming that the massive Bersih 3.0 demonstration of April 28 was an attempt by opposition parties to launch a revolution because they know that they cannot win the next general election through the ballot box, Mahathir is deep into new reality invention.

Something of what playwright Bertolt Brecht said about communist regimes is at work here: when the politburo claims that they derive their legitimacy from the masses and when the people want another governor, the central committee abolishes the people and appoints a new electorate.

These days Mahathir is into Brechtian invention.

He has decided to abolish the Bersih throngs of April 28, appointed a new electorate for the country, proposed it should give the Najib Razak-led government a two-thirds majority and suggested some uses for which the majority should be put to, like restoring the Internal Security Act.

A deliberately delusional ex-PM

In other words, Mahathir is not only presuming BN's victory in the next general election, he is also pre-empting the post-victory agenda.

This would be a complete reversal of what the massive size, the racial diversity and generational variety of the Bersih crowds have portended: a rejection of the political status quo and its replacement with a new order, at once more liberating and egalitarian than what the supposedly reform-seeking Prime Minister Najib Razak has wrought thus far.

By miming Mahathir's line on Bersih 3.0 that the crowds were out to foment revolution, Najib has dangerously assumed the reactionary stance of a predecessor whose authoritarian legacy he has been, albeit feebly, attempting to jettison.

A deliberately delusional former PM and a dithering existing one are combining to set up the country on a course that is entirely at odds with the currents let loose by the seismic results of the last general election.

In Mahathir's case, what he now says and proposes is a parody of his worst instincts, displayed through almost all of his 22-year tenure as PM; for would-be reformer Najib, it appears he cannot seem to decide what he wants his administration to be - reformist or regressive.

The situation bears the hallmarks of aged and decrepit regimes of past times that stuttered in confusion between the reform they cannot will for themselves and the repression they lack the force to impose.