

## **Choice irony: Tunku as seer, Dr M as purblind on Sabah**

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Observers of historical ironies would find plenty to relish in the one that seems to be coming up on the back of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's decision to empower a royal commission of inquiry (RCI) on the issue of illegal migrants given citizenship in Sabah.

This irony has to do with hypothetical developments, which if they eventuate, may well prove Tunku Abdul Rahman, founding prime minister of Malaysia and, more importantly, resuscitator of Umno in 1951 after the shock of party founder Onn Jaafar's resignation, as a seer on the issue of Umno's entry into Sabah.

By the same token, the same developments could prove Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the Tunku's nemesis and incubator of a mutant Umno ('Umno Baru' was its assumed name) as guilty of destructive myopia.

The Tunku had before he died in December 1990 warned Umno not to spread its wings to Sabah.

He said that from what he had seen and heard from his friend from Usno, Mustapha Harun, the latter always had problems controlling political factions in Sabah.

Therefore, the Tunku advised Umno, not to tread into waters that were inherently difficult to fathom.

Of course, the Tunku did not help his argument by citing the troubles of Mustapha governing Sabah as a basis for his advice.

Mustapha behaved like an oriental potentate, with whims and fancies to match. Mahathir lambasted his ways during one election campaign in Sabah when Usno was in competition with Harris Salleh's Berjaya for the right to rule the state.

Stumping for Harris, Mahathir, who was then deputy prime minister, observed that whenever he visited Sabah as education minister (August 1974-April 1976), he found the top leaders of the state to be absent - away in exotic locales like Lebanon.

Mahathir did not mention Mustapha by name but it was obvious he was referring to the Usno leader's weakness for the sybarite's lifestyle which was as likely to take him to the fleshpots of Beirut as to Spartan destinations like Tripoli where he once repaired to ask for help from Muammar Gaddafi over a perceived threat to Sabah's security by the communists who had just overrun Indochina.

Though Tunku Abdul Rahman was something of a bon vivant, he was no sybarite, but this did not prevent him from being indulgent towards Mustapha who, like the Tunku, was of aristocratic descent. (A sense of class solidarity is hard to dispel among the high born.)

Despite the earnestness of the Tunku's advice against Umno's entry into Sabah, there was little hope it would be heeded.

Flashing a cape before a bull

Mahathir has precious little time for the counsel of people whom he thinks weak and ineffective.

When Joseph Pairin Kitingan, the PBS chief minister of Sabah, took his party out of the federal BN coalition and joined Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's Gagasan Rakyat (People's Might) coalition days before the October 1990 general election, his move was like the flash of a matador's muleta (cape) before a bull.

Then-BN chief and PM Mahathir wasted no time after the election - which he won sensationally, thanks in no small part to cynical employment of the bogey of Christian plotting against Muslims (a prevision of Hasan Ali's tactics more than two decades after) - setting in train the moves, including Umno's entry into Sabah, seat gerrymandering, and electoral roll padding - that pegged Pairin's PBS to a narrow win in the Sabah state election of 1994, a win that vanished in the face of crossovers to Sabah BN.

Now, 18 years on, crossovers from Sabah BN to the independent bench by essentially the same invertebrates that ditched PBS for Sabah BN in 1994 have forced PM Najib into a forestalling manoeuvre in which the formation of a royal commission of inquiry to dig into how tens of thousands of illegal migrants in the state had been given citizenship and voting rights is in train.

The RCI would have to summon Mahathir to query him as to what his role in the entire episode had been.

The man is going to discover that the whole imbroglio stemmed from a decision of his taken in contravention of the Tunku's advice.

It's hard to see how he could emerge from the inquiry, which would lose all credibility if it does not summon him to testify, with his bona fides as a law-abiding former PM intact.