

Glaring dissonance within Najib's ranks

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By Terence Netto

The next time Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak gets up on his soapbox and sounds off on the change he has brought the country, he should check to see if among his ministerial cohort there's anyone propounding something at variance to what the skipper of the crew is saying.

Admittedly, this is not an easy thing to do when at the level of deputy prime minister, the point man has a second-in-command who often stakes out a position that is at an awkward angle to what he is proposing.

Nevertheless, when it is a question of thematic centrality - when you are pronouncing on what is supposed to be a defining feature of your administration - it is damaging to your credibility, if not to confidence in your powers of cognition, to find that you as commander are professing one thing and a lieutenant down the line is propounding something else.

This is the position the PM found himself yesterday as he held forth on a defining theme of his three-and-a-half year administration and before a constituency whose supposed and massive shift in electoral allegiance suggests that anything he is selling they are not buying.

"In the last three years, we (BN) have delivered real progress and change in this country," said the PM to a large gathering of Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman (KTAR) alumni in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The audience was largely composed of Chinese Malaysian graduates, a demographic that is said to have moved their votes substantively to the opposition Pakatan Rakyat's column.

Big dinner in BN fortress

The latest indication of this massive shift in electoral allegiance was seen at a PKR-organised dinner in the BN-bastion of Johor exactly a week before the PM spoke to the KTAR alumni in Setapak, Kuala Lumpur, yesterday.

Up to 8,000 largely Chinese Malaysians attended the dinner, the largest subscription paying political event held in the country in recent years.

The diners heard that as many as 10 parliamentary seats may fall to Pakatan in a hitherto invulnerable BN fortress in the coming general election. Presently, in Johor, the opposition has only one seat (Bakri, held by DAP).

The projection of a 10-seat take by Pakatan is founded on a supposedly massive shift in allegiance by Chinese voters to the opposition in a state where the Chinese complement of the BN, MCA, has long enjoyed unparalleled dominance.

Variously, the public has heard in the last few weeks that the PM keeps deferring the date of the general election because he reckons that there is still a chance he can convince Chinese Malaysians not to throw their votes after the hypothetical change promised by Pakatan in preference to the "real change" that the Najib administration has wrought since he took over as PM in April 2009.

To his audience in Setapak, Najib did not specify the contours of the "real change" he has brought other than saying that the country has posted a 5.4 percent rate of growth in the last economic quarter that is counter to the downward trend in much of the rest of the world.

Saifuddin's new politics

It is just as well that he did not delineate what this "real change" was because in Melbourne a day earlier, Deputy Higher Education Minister Saifuddin Abdullah, a sporadic liberal within the staunchly conservative ranks of Umno, enumerated before an Umno-organised seminar steps he suggested would be integral to the "new politics" that he envisions for his country.

Saifuddin listed some features of this new dispensation: lowering the voting age to 18, automatic registration of voters, local council elections, and reform of the Dewan Negara (Senate).

No prizes for guessing which coalitions competing for the votes of the electorate have proposed - and where feasible, moved to enact - these substantive reforms to the Malaysian polity.

In Melbourne, Saifuddin spoke like he had a dream ("new politics") that he hoped would be transmuted into reality. In Setapak, Najib was saying that the future Saifuddin envisaged is already Malaysia's current reality.

True, cognitive dissonance is a staple in all democracies, not just among competing political parties, but also within individual parties.

But as they say reality, sooner or later, has a way of wheeling us all into surgery for illusion-stripping. We have to wait for the general election before we can be sure whose illusions are in for surgical extirpation.