

'Best democracy' requires PM's presence in Parliament

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COMMENT After delivering a speech at the annual Gerakan convention yesterday that had traces of the staccato style much prized in partisan political discourse, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak would be remiss if he disdains to sit through Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim's response in Parliament to the Budget address.

Anwar has invited Najib to sit through the response, having himself listened to the PM-cum-finance minister's presentation of the Budget last Friday.

Anwar persuasively argued that as finance minister (1990-98), he, in adherence to parliamentary custom, sat through then opposition leader Lim Kit Siang's responses to his Budget addresses which seldom, if ever, condescended to scoring partisan points against the opposition.

The Budget speech of the finance minister is a mode of elevated discourse where the deliverer steers a course redolent of the point that the national economy is too serious a matter for its subornment to politics.

In his Budget address last week, Najib not only committed the cardinal sin of converting it into an outright electioneering ploy, he also lurched into a denunciation of the opposition.

This was not in keeping with the traditions of the address which eschews partisanship in favour of a heightened tone consistent with the gravity of the subject at hand: the financial state of the federation over the next year, something that of its nature beckons practitioners to the high road than the low one.

But one supposes that if in these days, schools can descend to framing questions for pupils' examinations that compel them to take a stance on political issues, the debasement of tropes properly regarded as exempt or removed from the taint of political partisanship is so far advanced even the PM is not immune to the bacillus.

All that could change, of course, if Najib sits through the opposition leader's address and, better yet, runs interference with point-of-order questions that could evoke the cut-and-thrust feature of parliamentary debate.

That way he would not only show he is quite serious about making Malaysia the "best democracy," as he averred a year ago, but also that his declining to go head-to-head in public debate with Anwar does not necessarily mean he would be slower on the uptake in a verbal joust with his nemesis.

A few good blows from Najib

From the rather clever, staccato style he displayed at the Gerakan convention yesterday, the PM showed that he wants to ratchet up the tempo of the verbal volleys that are part and parcel of the democratic fray before an election.

The Gerakan meeting yesterday, not the Budget address last Friday, was the proper forum for that kind of talk.

And Najib, at the Gerakan talk fest, served up what could be interpreted as the hors d'oeuvres to the main course today, if Anwar responds with a reasoned critique of the Budget and the PM interrupts and counters with gusto.

Certainly, Najib got in a few good blows at the opposition at the Gerakan meeting yesterday, pooh-poohing their Buku Jingga as highfalutin nonsense and trotting out the standard theme that BN are case-hardened and proven administrators of the country while Pakatan Rakyat are rank amateurs and novices.

Political bluster like this is the warp and woof of an election season in a democracy. The PM's speech was couched in that vein and begs a reply which the opposition leader, scheduled to respond this morning to the Budget address, could uncork with his usual panache.

The PM could then take the fight directly to his opponent by joining battle in an arena custom-made for this sort of verbal contestation.

Najib has declined a face-to-face public debate with the prime pretender to his throne, lamely arguing that such debates are not part of Malaysian political culture.

But in today's session in Parliament, he could salvage that feeble excuse with a combative presence to convey the point that the opposition leader is not the unchallenged monarch of the oratorical survey.

In other words, things are nicely in place for the final, feverish prelude to the general election where arguments, flavoured with invective of the permissible kind, are set to take centre stage.

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