

## **Najib the Delayer's Roman strategy**

**MalaysiaKini.com**

**2 November, 2012**

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COMMENT Malaysia's second prime minister Abdul Razak Hussein was a member of the Fabian Society, a socialist forerunner of the British Labour Party that rejected the revolutionary seizure of power in favour of a gradualist approach.

His son, Najib Razak, the current premier, though no socialist, is a Fabian of sorts, too. The Fabians derived their name from the Roman consul, dictator and general Fabius Maximus, who was known as Fabius the Delayer after his military strategy.

Let us understand Fabius before we return to Najib's political strategy.

Between the years 218 to 201BC, Rome and the north African city-state of Carthage were engaged in the Second Punic War for control over the Mediterranean. The great Carthaginian general Hannibal rampaged across the Italian peninsula for over 15 years, inflicting crushing military defeats upon Rome and causing political upheaval by plundering the countryside and turning Rome's provincial Italian allies against it.

Hannibal's tactical prowess was so formidable that Fabius reasoned that direct military engagement with him was foolhardy. Instead, Fabius opted for a form of guerrilla warfare by refusing pitched battles, settling instead on sniping at Hannibal's stragglers and supply lines.

While Fabius' strategy denied Hannibal the political glory of military victories, he in turn was criticised in the Roman senate for such a 'cowardly' approach. His rivals named him 'Cunctator', which sounds ruder than it is, for it merely means 'Delayer' in Latin.

Politically-flawed strategy

Whilst strategically cunning, Fabius' (right) approach was politically flawed because it ran against the highly aggressive Roman mindset. In 217BC, after his six-month term as dictator expired, Fabius' strategy was not renewed. Instead, the new consul Gaius Terentius Varro rallied popular support for a head-on clash of arms with Hannibal.

The result was the battle of Cannae, which has gone down in history as one of the most perfect examples of battlefield tactics. Some 86,000 Romans and their allies faced off against a smaller Carthaginian force of 50,000 men.

The course of the battle illustrates the prudence of Fabius' decision to avoid a direct clash with Hannibal.

The more numerous Roman army was completely encircled by the Carthaginian forces. The

result was an absolute slaughter. Nearly 78,000 Romans - one-fifth of the men of military age - may have died that day against only 6,000 to 8,000 of Hannibal's men who perished.

It was a crushing defeat for Rome, but for reasons which remain debated to this day, Hannibal decided not to lay siege to Rome and instead focused on weakening its alliances with the various Italian tribes.

Roman defeat at Cannae was followed by a return to the Fabian strategy. Rome's military comeback would only occur under the generalship of Publius Cornelius Scipio in 210BC. Scipio was Hannibal's greatest student for he had learned his military lessons by surviving several of Hannibal's triumphs, including Cannae.

Hannibal's (left) grand strategy was to carry the war against Rome to Italy, wreak military havoc and use that to politically fracture Rome's system of alliances with the Italian tribes that kept it dominant and supplied much of its military power.

Scipio applied the same strategy to the Carthaginian empire. Carthage's main military strength came from allies in Spain and Numidia (a Berber kingdom in western Tunisia). Despite opposition from the cautious Fabius, Scipio took the war first to Spain and then to Africa. The Spanish forces were defeated and the Numidians, with their crack cavalry, induced to defect from Carthage.

When Hannibal and Scipio finally faced off on the plains of Zama south of Carthage (near modern Tunis), the Carthaginian forces lacked their former strength. Scipio now brought his learning of Hannibal to bear and successfully anticipated many of the latter's tactics. The result was Hannibal's first defeat and the end of the war.

When faced with a superior foe, Fabius' strategy of delaying made sense as long as Rome was unable to produce a decisive military answer to Hannibal. Ironically, it was Hannibal's very success that forged his nemesis, Scipio.

Both relied on a mix of direct confrontation and indirect disruption of their opponent's alliance networks. Only Scipio (right) was able to produce decisive victory by combining both military and political strategy. The difference was due, in part, to the contrasting psychologies of the Roman and Carthaginian senates.

The historian Polybius argued that Rome's determination outweighed that of Carthage because the Romans personally fought for their empire and freedom whilst Carthage employed mercenaries to achieve the same. The Romans had the fortitude to withstand defeats far beyond conventional expectation - witness Cannae - whereas Carthaginian resolve was not as strong.

Najib's Fabian approach

In Malaysia today, Najib, by delaying elections for the last three years, has employed a Fabian strategy of avoiding decisive confrontation with a strong foe.

Whilst the 12th general election of 2008 was not a decisive loss for the Umno-dominated BN, it denied them a two-thirds majority in Parliament, left several of Umno's allies severely weakened, and was treated by Umno as a moral defeat.

Somewhat like Hannibal, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has focused on sapping BN's allies away. The abortive 'Sept 16' plan of 2009 - to win government via defections of BN lawmakers to Anwar's Pakatan Rakyat - was nipped in the bud, but the basic strategy has continued alongside efforts to woo the general voter.

Like Scipio's mirroring strategy, Najib's response was the fall of the Pakatan-led state government of Perak, which ensued from the defection of several state lawmakers to a 'BN-friendly' stance. Similar moves were played at the parliamentary level.

The many by-elections since 2008 and political surveys have shown that Malaysia is almost evenly divided between the Pakatan and BN coalitions, with the balance towards BN.

In the impending 13th general elections (GE13) much will rest on electoral technicalities (rural weighting, gerrymandering, phantom voters, etc.) and the favour of new voters.

Both Pakatan and BN have been fighting on similar ground. When the hot air about ethno-racial politics clears, the main arguments are about who is fit to govern and who will deliver the most wealth into Malaysians' pockets.

It is rumoured that Najib's Fabian approach has earned him criticism from Umno's conservative warlords. It has also generated frustration amongst voters, who are now weary of a three-year long election season.

His survival at stake

It is here that the analogy between Fabius and Najib breaks down. Fabius was willing to champion an unpopular strategy to save his city from defeat even though his career suffered.

Elections are also different from battles in that elections cannot be indefinitely deferred, short of suspending the democratic process and installing a dictatorship via a state of emergency. Najib's father, Abdul Razak Hussein, effectively did so following Umno's last major loss in 1969.

However, BN has been capable of winning GE13 for some time now. The question has more been whether Najib could deliver a decisive enough victory that would secure his own political career from challenge. After all, this was the pretext that Najib employed to depose Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in 2009.

The uncertainty of winning back the symbolically potent two-thirds majority in Parliament has surely been weighing heavily on Najib's mind. Voters have left BN because they want

better governance, less wastage and more justice.

BN can at best deliver these demands to a limited degree, and then only inconsistently. The newer Pakatan state governments have largely proven that such gains can be made provided internal political inertia is minimal and political will is present.

Yet the popular vote is not enough. In order to form a new federal government, a coalition needs to secure the majority of seats in Parliament, which is not the same thing as a majority of voters. Pakatan faces a struggle to break into the so-called 'fixed deposits' of Sabah and Sarawak, but enough headway has been made that Najib may continue to delay. There is lately even a sense that victory could tip Pakatan's way.

It now seems likely that elections will happen in 2013 if decisive, rather than mere, victory is Najib's goal, and his faith in cash handouts to voters, and perhaps other undisclosed measures, is strong. Or else, with the opportunities for decisive victory slipping away with time, he may simply be reconciled to enjoy high office until his term runs out.

Even if snap elections are called this year - and time for such speculation is fast evaporating - the delaying strategy has largely run its course. Elections are constitutionally mandated within the next six months. There is no Malaysian Scipio to dramatically turn the tables in Najib or even Anwar's favour.

#### Cosmetic reforms

Manipulation of the electoral roll is widely believed to be a major strategic ace for BN. Rumours have it that foreign nationals have been given Malaysian identity cards in exchange for votes, repeating a tactic used to maintain hegemony in Sabah in the 1990s.

Such manipulations have not gone unnoticed or without protest. Bersih, a popular civil society movement for clean and fair elections, has staged three demonstrations over recent years, with the last in April attended by hundreds of thousands.

This scenario recalls the impacts on morale stemming from Carthage's dependence on mercenaries and Rome's reliance on citizens to sustain their respective empires.

Even if BN wins GE13 with a 'mercenary force', its hegemony may not prevail against an increasingly vocal and critical citizenry. Yet, while the Romans could withstand the most punishing defeats, many highly-skilled Malaysians have already migrated out or are considering doing so if misrule continues. The mass of Malaysians do not enjoy such mobility and are badly in need of a visionary development policy.

Much of government and business affairs in Malaysia have hung on tenterhooks for the last three years as Najib pursued a Fabian strategy combined with a personal image campaign reminiscent of US presidentialism. Cosmetic reforms have been rolled out and their virtues oversold. The opportunity for deeper reforms to politics and the economy has been missed, presumably stymied by internal opposition from within Umno's conservative bloc.

The world economy is in the midst of a crisis that could stretch out for another five years, and the trade-oriented Malaysian economy is taxiing in intermediate production whilst graduate unemployment is at over 50 percent.

Valuable time for leadership has been wasted. Whoever wins the next election will have to confront this external economic challenge for the length of their term.

Rome sacked Carthage in the Third Punic War and took over the Mediterranean. However, as decay and over-extension set in, it was the barbarians, rather than an imperial rival, who came in from outside and sacked Rome.

Let us hope that victory for a politician in GE13 does not lead to defeat for Malaysia.

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Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/213239>