

2012 - the year that dribbled away from the PM
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Oleh Terence Netto

COMMENT 2012 will be remembered as the year that got away from Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

His attempt to fix on a suitable time in which to hold polls a new PM traditionally calls to obtain the mandate that would give his 'new broom' administration credibility was simply swept away in the flux of unfavorable events.

Najib would have looked on with sympathy to British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's mournful reply when asked on the challenges that a statesman faced: "Events, my dear boy, events."

True, unfavorable events can dribble out the momentum from a prime minister's energy to shape his agenda and obtain popular support for it.

However, Najib seemed unable to listen to the rustle of his vision of how things should be in the country and steer events to advantage.

When opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was unexpectedly acquitted in the Sodomy II case, the PM tried to leverage on the surprise decision by Justice Mohd Zabidin Diah by saying it showed that the judiciary was independent.

Because the year began with that decision by the High Court judge on Jan 9, and with Najib's apparent attempt to lever it to advantage, it provided a promising starting point for the PM to give bite to his vision, enunciated the previous September, to make Malaysia the 'best democracy'.

Almost immediately, the lift he gained from portraying that decision as indicative of a new-found judicial independence was threatened with deflation by calls that the case be appealed.

He did not comment on the calls and when the attorney-general's chambers filed the notice of appeal, it seemed that the unexpectedly good start the new year had afforded the PM was being undermined by the assertion of old reflexes resistant to change.

This tenor was sustained as polls reform advocacy group, Bersih, announced that they were planning a sit-down demonstration for late April at Dataran Merdeka.

Here, the Najib administration showed that it had learned little from the Bersih demonstration of July 2011 that had successfully conveyed the message about concerns over irregularities in the electoral roll and demands that a general election be conducted in

a more equitable manner were matters that could not be ignored.

To an administration infused with a newfangled desire to project its democratic credentials, Bersih's planned sit-down demo presented an opportunity for a refurbished response to the one displayed towards the predecessor demonstration of July 2011 that had unnerved the government by its size and racial diversity.

To be sure a new administration does not get to enjoy many chances to spray fresh icing on what the public suspects is stale cake.

Just then, there were grounds for the public to suspect that it was business as usual in the way the Najib administration had handled revelations of scandalous misappropriations in the running of the national cattle-breeding project.

Also, news of a diamond ring meant for the use of the prime minister's wife costing millions of ringgit further reinforced public perception that wanton profligacy continued to be the order of the day.

No show of 'new broomism'

Thus, Bersih's sit-down demonstration planned for April 28, represented a rare opportunity for the PM to show that the gap between his liberal rhetoric and the tawdry reality of aspects of his government wasn't going to be embarrassingly wide when he had primary volition over an issue.

Najib dithered on the issue of a suitable venue for Bersih's demo, his indecision allowing the stale mind-sets of his underlings to assert themselves on the flux of policy.

The upshot: The April 28 demonstration turned out to be the largest gathering Kuala Lumpur had witnessed in several years. The youth, racial diversity and comradeship of the protestors served notice to the government that if it did not change, it would be changed.

What could have been, had the government not been ham-fisted in handling the demo, evidence of fresh thinking towards public protests turned out instead to be a public relations disaster.

Najib was exposed as a liberal poseur rather than the liberalising reformer his rhetoric was meant to project.

He had completed, in the month of April, three years in the saddle of a new administration with almost nothing to show for his 'new broomism' than vacuous slogans trumpeting transformations to the economy and government.

Three years is enough of a span for a newly-installed PM to show what he can do without recourse to a meaningful mandate.

At the end of this year, he had gone nearly four years without that mandate, an unsustainably lengthy span, with new and destructive currents let loose on the legitimacy of his hold on office.

Legitimate doubts about what he had allegedly done in his pre-PM past jostle with solidifying opinion that he has merely been a hamster on a treadmill than a herald of change.

Macmillan's mournful lament about events being in the saddle and tend to ride statesmen more than are shaped by them is a suitable epitaph for the administration of our sixth PM.

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