

BN's 'jingoism dividend' from Sabah invasion

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COMMENT The BN must be grateful for Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's blood-soaked offensive against Tausug or Sulu invaders in Sabah, and the resulting surge of nationalistic passions among most Malaysians.

As the number of dead enemies is chalked up and noted with approval, like a World Cup score or a stock market index, reports from the battlefield are a welcome distraction from the BN's troubled preparations for the general election.

In Sarawak, BN component parties Parti Rakyat Sarawak, Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party and Sarawak United People's Party, have been convulsed with internal strife since their shaky performance in the 2011 state election.

The goliath in the coalition, Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu, has kept a lid on infighting, thanks to party leader and Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud's shrewdness, largesse and longevity. Now, BN's chances in Sarawak have been boosted slightly by the Sabah war, and by Nur Misuari, founder of the Moro National Liberation Front.

According to a report on March 4 in The Philippine Star, Nur Misuari (right) states his Sulu clan's claim on Sarawak, as well as Sabah. He had made a similar throwaway remark last October, but only this latest quixotic tilt was played up in the Sarawak press.

Some Sarawakians have now been stirred to share the terror felt by Sabahans, and some have found renewed enthusiasm for being part of Malaysia. These are emotions that will probably increase votes for the Sarawak BN.

The effects of the brutal crackdown on the Sabah elections are harder to predict. The invasion has driven many anxious Sabahan voters into the arms of Umno, despite Umno ministers' prevarication for the initial three weeks of the invasion.

Many Sabahans and Sarawakians have muted, for now, their debate regarding autonomy and a fair share of the states' petroleum income.

Human rights abuse downplayed

A minority of Malaysians will be troubled by the human rights abuses that will inevitably result when any army wages war on insurgents.

We have little information about how the 54 'terrorists' were killed, amid allegations of indiscriminate shootings. An unidentified teenager, perhaps 13 or 14 years old, was shot dead on March 10, in the bushes near Kampung Ikan Bilis, Lahad Datu.

There have been 97 arrests under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (Sosma),

though alleged collaborators could have been charged using any of a dozen criminal laws.

The number detained without trial has almost equalled then prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad 's notorious 1987 Operasi Lalang crackdown under the Internal Security Act (ISA).

The application of Sosma, the illegitimate child of the ISA, has elicited little comment in our national media.

Umno spent three weeks, from the time Sulu invaders landed on Feb 9, calculating the potential profits and losses of an attack. In the end, Najib, following a nod from Mahathir, settled on the course of action of maximum violence.

The Sabahan Sulu votes lost, following the military campaign, must occupy only a small column in Umno's ledger of votes, compared with the windfall the party expects from nationalist sentiment.

But Sulu militants will remember human rights abuses, as guerrillas in other insurgencies do, from Sri Lanka to Algeria to Colombia.

If Umno continues to court voters with its heavy-handed 'scorched earth' campaign, instead of accepting a ceasefire, Malaysians will expect to pay a price eventually. Umno may win the electoral battle, but Malaysians stand to lose much in a guerrilla war.

Last refuge for Umno

Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, as Samuel Johnson said, and Najib is certainly running for cover.

Umno has failed to boost flagging Malay support by championing Malay 'rights'. Ethnic supremacy was once a recipe for electoral dominance, as exemplified by Najib's father Abdul Razak Hussein, Malaysia's second prime minister, but Umno's 19th century politics have proved less palatable in the 21st century.

Umno has tried to unite Malays behind the banner of Islam, too. Umno's ban on non-Muslims' use of 'Allah' is an example of religious extremism. But this approach has been blunted by the PAS opposition's Islamist credentials and attacks on Umno's unIslamic stain of corruption.

It is easy enough to imagine Umno strategists working through ideas to drum up Muslim Malay support using religion, race and nation and moving on - in desperation - to militant nationalism, as a logical conclusion.

Incumbent governments do well in elections held around the time of an armed conflict. BN will undoubtedly derive a 'jingoism dividend' from this populist war. War can give a weak and indecisive cabinet a flattering facelift.

Israel's incumbent governments, for example, have gone to war around the time of each of the past four general elections, to bolster popular support. The coyly named Israeli Defence

Force invaded the West Bank during Operation Defensive Shield from March to May 2002, eight months before polls in January 2003.

Israel's new administration occupied Lebanon from July to August 2006, four months after winning power in March 2006. Israel devastated Gaza in January 2009, during Operation Cast Lead, a month before an election. And last November, Israeli tanks demolished Gaza again, during Operation Pillar of Cloud, two months before the latest election in January 2013.

Will BN win convincingly on the back of this 'feel-good' factor, especially if it can buy more time with a declaration of temporary emergency rule in Sabah?

A simple BN majority appears likely, as long as credulous Malaysians forget Umno's initial appeasement.

BN hopes we will remember only the reports of mutilated bodies, first announced in a "sneak preview" by Mahathir on March 3, then 'confirmed' by the police on March 6.

BN trusts we will consider only the unwitting sacrifices of our armed forces and police officers, when we finally get to vote.

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