

Will Najib flunk final test as liberal?

MalaysiaKini.com

April 8, 2013

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COMMENT Has Ibrahim Ali been a stalking horse for Umno that the party won't renounce for reasons of strategic manoeuvre, or is he an unrepresentative outlier of merely nuisance value?

That this moving force behind the Malay right-wing group, Perkasa, was a convenient vent for Dr Mahathir Mohamad to air views that the former prime minister would consider inappropriate to own up to in public has been evident for a long time.

That Ibrahim was also a stalking horse for the hardliners of Umno said to be allied to deputy president Muhyiddin Yassin was also inferred for some time.

There was doubt, however, as to whether the Pasir Mas MP was also channeling for BN chief Najib Abdul Razak, putative Umno reformer and liberal whose measures in that mode are believed to have been opposed by Umno hardliners and have drawn flak from Perkasa.

Those doubts would be removed when and if Ibrahim's name appears on the Umno list of candidates for Parliament.

We shall soon know as GE13 waits to get on the road with the Election Commission meeting on Wednesday to set the dates for nominations and polling.

Over the weekend, Mahathir openly backed Ibrahim's inclusion on the list, rationalising the move as gratitude for what the maverick politician has done, presumably in the interests of Umno as these are conceived by the former PM.

That Mahathir had to come out in the open to support Ibrahim's inclusion somewhat suggests that the latter may have tried to obtain selection on his own but was rebuffed.

Three-way fight

Some time ago Umno secretary-general Tengku Adnan Tunku Mansor let it be known that people should not assume his party would not field a candidate for the Pasir Mas seat in Kelantan.

Everyone knows that if Umno fields a candidate in Pasir Mas, there would then be a three-cornered fight for the seat, with Ibrahim and a PAS candidate as the other two contestants.

Such a battle's likely upshot: Ibrahim (left) would lose the seat to PAS under whose banner the maverick politician had campaigned and won the last election by a comfortable 8,000-plus vote majority.

In the 2008 election, PAS had deliberately stepped aside to allow Ibrahim through to contest Pasir Mas in a one-on-one tussle with the Umno candidate on the assumption that a three-cornered fight could issue in an Umno victory.

To PAS it was better to have Ibrahim - who has always had his share of hardcore support in a constituency from which he hails - as the winner than to allow Umno the chance of gaining ground in Kelantan in a general election in which the latter nurtured hopes of ousting PAS, after coming close to doing so at the previous election in 2004.

As GE12's results turned out, PAS not only retained their state assembly and parliamentary grip on Kelantan; they strengthened it.

Tengku Adnan's signal that Umno had not ruled out contesting in Pasir Mas was the strongest sign yet that Najib's reluctance to publicly repudiate Ibrahim's rants did not imply tacit acquiescence in the latter's hardline positions on Malay rights.

Mahathir's public espousal of Ibrahim's selection as Umno candidate in Pasir Mas is seen as putting pressure on Najib to include Ibrahim.

If there is an Umno candidate other than Ibrahim in the fight for Pasir Mas, the ensuing three-cornered fight is likely to result in a PAS victory.

An Ibrahim defeat, sustained in his own backyard, would seriously undermine his position as a loudhailer for Malay rights.

That Najib is afraid to antagonise Mahathir was quite clear from the start of his premiership in April 2009. He did not include Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin in his cabinet, a slight that would have pleased Mahathir especially when it was accompanied by the selection of Mahathir's son, Mukhriz (above), as a deputy minister.

Mahathir would like to see Khairy out of the way to smooth Mukhriz's climb up the Umno hierarchy.

Displeasing Dr M

There is only one instance since his assumption of the prime ministerial office four years ago that Najib has been in clear breach of Mahathir's wishes.

This was in allowing a royal commission of inquiry (RCI) into the question of illegal residents in Sabah who have been given citizenship papers under a project in the mid-1990s that was widely suspected to have had Mahathir's blessings.

Throughout 2012 Najib struggled to stave off pressure from BN MPs from Sabah to empower an RCI on the illegal residents' issue that is the cause of much discontent among locals in the state.

Last July this restiveness led to the abandonment of BN of two MPs from Sabah's otherwise

solid support of BN. The two crossed over to the independent benches, a move that semaphored a stampede.

To squelch the threat posed by more crossovers to BN dominance of Sabah, a state hitherto regarded as a fixed deposit by the federal BN, Najib had to yield to the pressure by setting up the RCI.

Predictably, revelations emanating from the inquiry have cast grave doubt on Mahathir's denial of responsibility for the fraudulent grant of citizenship to Sabah's illegals, an action that savours of treason, particularly in the wake of the intrusion at Lahad Datu of armed men from the littoral islands of the Philippines.

Reports indicate that assorted members of this armed group hold Malaysian citizenship papers, a matter that would place Mahathir smack in the dock as having allegedly approved an operation that has redounded in grave peril to our national security.

After having yielded to the formation of a RCI that has placed Mahathir in extremely bad light, would Najib now displease Umno's eminence grise further by not including Ibrahim in the party's candidate list for GE13?

Although Ibrahim's inclusion would not mollify Mahathir completely, it would mitigate his displeasure at Najib for empowering the RCI.

But that would also mean that the last shreds of Najib's claim to being an Umno liberal would have gone up in smoke with the attendant conclusion that Ibrahim was also a stalking horse for the PM.

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