

PM has not heard of the 'bully pulpit'

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COMMENT Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's 'kangkung' remarks may not acquire the historical notoriety of Marie Antoinette's callous "Let them eat cake" to hungry Parisian crowds on the eve of the French Revolution.

It may not even exceed for obtuseness his insistence on asking recalcitrant Penang crowds, "Are you ready for BN?" at last year's Chinese New Year gathering organised by BN.

The reason the insensitivity of the 'kangkung' remarks has unleashed a torrent of derision on social media is that it has distilled for the public what is most troubling about Najib: a leader intent on being all things to all kinds has turned out to be the mannequin in a posh display window, his policies and practices like the jewellery hanging off it - accessorised, not real.

Because character can shape circumstance, the remarks and public gestures of a leader can have great impact on the psychology of the masses he leads, prompting trust which allows the people to go where the leader wants them to.

Sometimes the panache of the gesture where the heart unites with the mind can be particularly striking as when Najib's predecessor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, visited his aged mother back in Penang, days after taking over from an overstaying former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad in late October 2003.

The front-page pictures of the new prime minister kissing his mother's hand conveyed the message that Abdullah was a paragon of filial piety, a winning quality in a socially conservative nation.

That image - not discounting sympathy for him over his mother's death a few months later - lingered in the public mind, triggering a tidal wave of popular support for him in the March 2004 general election.

Post-victory, Mahathir allowed that had he known, he would have retired as PM earlier.

If imitation is a form of flattery, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (right in photo) dabbled in the form when photographed paying 'Abdullah-like'

respects to his mother shortly after being elected as president in October 2004.

History would write a radically different postscript to what has come to be regarded as a flaccid Abdullah interregnum between an activist Mahathir era and a Najib takeover, which five years after its start, is now sputtering to a halt.

But if Abdullah invited his doom by not following through on his best instincts, Najib is tempting a similar fate by supplying more evidence that his notion of leadership is survival through palliation of as many interest groups as there are and when some of them inevitably clash, by passivity in his implied role as arbiter.

Set the terms or be set upon

The idea of the prime ministership or presidency as a 'bully pulpit' from which a political supremo rhetorically steers the country through waters, stormy or otherwise, to where he wants it to go was popularised by former US president Theodore Roosevelt.

The idea is incontestable in democracies: the occupant of the highest political office has available to him/her unrivalled opportunities for influencing the body politic through rhetoric, policies, practices and public gestures.

As prime minister, Mahathir hectored, lectured, pushed and pulled in keeping with his activist style; he got much done, of dubious value though a lot of it was.

Abdullah initially pushed for reform but as the forces of reaction shoved back, he stalled and eventually paid the price for paralysis, self-induced and others' imposed.

Najib started out by liberalising but when reactionary voices rose in remonstrance, attempted to placate them and what was worse, reduced his voice to a pipsqueak, and then, to no voice at all in the ensuing cacophony.

It comes as no surprise that now even a piddling attempt at humour over food prices - the kangkung saga - becomes stuff for derision.

This is symptomatic of his vacation of the bully pulpit, an extremely handy instrument for a leader wanting to set the terms of the debate on any issue.

Rhetorically, a leader has to set the terms or be set upon. Also, a leader wanting to placate everybody winds up appeasing nobody.

Close on five years after taking over from Abdullah, Najib is widely considered to be

in a worse off position than his predecessor was after the political tsunami of March 2008 when BN lost its super-majority in Parliament and Abdullah's premiership became unsustainable.

Now the question is not whether Najib must be replaced, though that seems the argument of internal critics wanting to shift him. The issue is whether the Umno way of national stewardship is relevant any longer.

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