

Pakatan proposal unlikely to incur BN disdain

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COMMENT The last time opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim called for a national dialogue in which all political parties participate, his proposition contained in a Merdeka Day commemorative speech elicited the disdain of BN leaders.

The latter are not likely to react with similar alacrity and comparable derision to a renewal of that proposal made yesterday by Anwar after a Pakatan Rakyat leadership council meeting in Kuala Lumpur.

This is because circumstances have changed. Last August the government was still basking in the glow of its electoral triumph of three months before.

It could afford to show haughty disdain for the propositions of a parliamentary-lagging if popular vote-leading Pakatan Rakyat.

Further, tens of election petitions filed by Pakatan were being dismissed by a nitpicking judiciary more interested in finding technical flaws than in hearing out opposition claims of having been hard done by at the ballot.

In that delusively triumphant stupor, it was easy for Umno-BN to be disdainful of dialogue overtures from Pakatan.

Four months on from its display of hauteur, the ruling powers are not in any position to be heedless or hubristic.

The reason: the combined effect of inflation and the intensification of racial and religious tensions have forced on Umno-BN awareness of the thinness of its electoral triumph.

To be sure, that the government has been losing popular support was evident from well before last May's 13th general election.

But at the general election Umno-BN's 60 percent take of parliamentary seats was sufficiently large to enable it to blithely ignore the implications of its continuing slide in the popular vote - its 47 percent tally to Pakatan's 51 percent was enough to sound the alarm bells, but it didn't because of complacency induced by its parliamentary cushion.

Understandably, a government long inured to gerrymandered electoral privilege is apt to be slow to wake up to the realities of its popular decline.

The fact that its polls victory last May was a win without a mandate was emphasised when it decided to opt for subsidy cuts in preference to curtailment to its extravagant spending, and what was worse, in addition to contemplating raising highway tolls in contravention to a pre-polls pledge not to.

Public suspicion rose that the government had recklessly overspent in the pre-election period to buy votes and in the polls' aftermath was imposing on the rakyat the penalty of its criminal profligacy.

Coupled with an insensible policy of faulting the minority Chinese for supposed ingratitude and the Christians for encroaching on Muslim sensitivities, the government was seen as broadly alienating.

Not one to lead from the front

Moreover, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's adamant silence in the face of mounting racial and religious tensions has fanned the perception he is not one to lead from the front; he'd rather palliate everyone than lead anyone.

Against this background, a renewal by Pakatan of an earlier urging for national dialogue is unlikely to be treated with the cavalier disdain it was when first floated by Anwar last August.

At that time, Anwar's proposal was derisively noted by its critics from Umno as coming from a person who only recently had been leading public protests imputing widespread fraud in the GE13 vote.

But matters have radically altered since last August when Umno-BN had not yet come to terms with the underlying costs to its GE13 triumph - it had been built on fiscal irresponsibility and weighed down with racial and religious downsides that would exact dire post-polls reckoning.

Those costs have come up and Umno-BN is wallowing in the inevitable downdraft.

This has caused clamour to rise within Umno for Najib to reverse parts of his economic policies on the grounds that they would consign BN to certain defeat at the next general election.

It is ironic that a loser's tag is now being pinned on Najib so soon after he was seen as having, only last October, stitched up a victory in Umno's internal polls to complement the one he had garnered for the party in GE13, where Umno alone toted up 88 parliamentary seats compared to 79 seats at GE12.

The whole affair reinforces the transient nature of victories crafted by Najib whose leadership is built on the palliation of as many interest groups as there are.

Where there is much accommodation, there is much compromise of principle. And though seemingly successful placation generates the glow that all would be well especially when assured that it would indeed be well, it's soon discovered that the euphoria is not worth the hangover.

The costs have come up on Najib's governance, or should one say, misgovernment,

That is why Pakatan's proposal for a national dialogue is unlikely to be spurned this time round; it provides a buoy for a floundering PM to latch on to keep from sinking.

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