

Anwar move affords Najib escape hatch

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COMMENT After twice making a proposal in recent months for a dialogue on issues plaguing the country, Anwar Ibrahim yesterday moved to the next stage of his campaign to flush Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak out of his somnolence.

In a speech of late blooming significance, the opposition leader spelled out the terms of a national consensus, his prescription for drawing the country back from the precipice of racial and religious disaster on which he feels it stands.

Anwar said the fraught conditions now resembled those that obtained at the outbreak of racial riots in May, 1969 - the most toxic incident in the historical memory of Malaysians, any reference to which induces in those old enough to recall it an agonised misery of remembering.

To forestall a repeat of that conflagration, Anwar proposed all-round acquiescence to two cardinal postulates he reckons are the building blocks of national concord.

The first is reaffirmation of Islam's special role in the psychical make-up of the country, and the other is reassertion of constitutional guarantees of the right for other religions to be practiced.

In other words, the edifice of a nation built on a system of primacy for Islam within a context of respect and protection for other religions practiced by a plural people.

Anwar envisions that once the two postulates are unequivocally endorsed by all political parties, presently spiralling racial and religious tensions would recede, enabling attention to be properly paid to the social and economic ills besetting the population.

The problem with Anwar's prescription is that Najib - whose passive leadership and incoherent substance have allowed the country to sustain a serious nosebleed, especially in the last several months - would, if he accepts the prescription, be required to retract steps already taken by Umno's rabid supporting cast to stanch the flow.

This retraction is unlikely on the part of a leader whose penchant for keeping in the rear rather than at the forefront of political developments has shown he lacks the

courage for the front-running work consensus building requires.

But Najib has no choice at this stage, given the latest developments in the 'Allah' controversy, the bellwether issue that has left the country precariously poised on the verge of racial and religious schisms.

Last week Perkasa's sponsor, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, moved to occupy the extreme position on the 'Allah' controversy by claiming that Christians have an ulterior motive in wanting to use it in their rituals of worship and faith education.

Mahathir's comments marked a radical turn in his stance on the 'Allah' issue. Prior to this he was milder in his comments; these tended towards prodding Christians to placate peninsular Malay/Muslim sensitivities on the matter.

What prompted sharp turn in stance?

Naturally, speculation immediately arose as to what would have prompted the sharp turn in his stance. It settled on the theory that he wants Najib out as PM.

It would help to prise Najib out by taking the extreme position on the 'Allah' issue so that Najib would have either to follow suit or maintain his tepid defence of the 10-point solution the cabinet had worked out with Christian groups in April 2011.

For Najib, taking the extreme position in tandem with Mahathir would endanger the BN standing in Sabah and Sarawak where the majority of Malaysia's 2.6 million Christians live and whose electoral support the BN depends for its majority in Parliament.

With state elections due in Sarawak in two years, a Najib decision to ban the use of the term by Christians on the peninsula would be certain to lose BN votes in Sarawak.

Even a tepid defence of the 10-point solution which would be the case where the federal government allows the use of the term to non-Muslims on the peninsula if individual states do not have explicit laws that disallow it would not be sustainable for long.

A more viable position would be for Najib to reassert the 10-point solution and persuade states whose laws hinder its implementation to either rescind the laws or ignore their enforcement.

These moves would certainly incur the ire of Perkasa, the NGO noted for stridency

in espousing Malay rights, not to mention discomfit sections of Umno opposed to any stance that waters down Malay/Muslim exclusivity for the right to use the term.

On the 'Allah' issue, Najib's passivity and dithering has gradually left him trapped between a stone and a hard place.

Thus Anwar's offer yesterday of a dialogue aimed at reaching a national consensus within whose contours lies room for the PM to ease out of his quandary would be most welcome.

Small wonder that a day after the proffer was made, Umno's No 3 in its leadership ranks, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, responded positively to Anwar's proposition.

Anwar has read Najib's dilemma well enough to deploy a move that enables the Pakatan Rakyat supremo to combine astute reading of the national political scenario with statesmanlike concern for maintaining peace and harmony.

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