

Will the GST be the last straw for Najib?

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COMMENT Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak will go down in the history of this country as the man who 'bulldozed' his way to implement the goods and services tax (GST).

It is a bold move, but it may cost him his job, his popularity and the support that Barisan Nasional (BN) will receive in the coming general election.

Other prime ministers in the past would have reviewed the situation on the ground before deciding whether to proceed or postpone the GST, but a hard-pressed Najib has plunged ahead with his new consumption tax structure despite facing protests by the people.

Barely a year ago, on May 1 last year, some 50,000 protesters, who were mainly Malays, had descended into the streets of Kuala Lumpur to make their voices heard, but this has sadly fallen on deaf ears.

Two anti-GST protests in the past one month have seen over 80 protesters being arrested for trespassing into the Kelana Jaya Customs office, a clear sign that Najib is not hearing the people.

Within less than an hour after I started writing this article, the #KitaLawan movement secretariat has announced that it will again take the protest against GST to the streets of Kuala Lumpur on May 1. Because I am affected, and May 1 being a public holiday, I may also join the street protest myself.

Why? Allow me to give my analysis for free.

After all that have happened, Najib has to take cognisance that the people are angry because they not only have to pay the GST now, but that major issues on corruption, the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) saga, and other abuses of public funds have not been addressed adequately despite being highlighted year after year by the Auditor-General's Report.

Why do I, as a taxpayer of this country, now have to pay for the inefficiency of civil servants and even the well-known corruption of our politicians? Name it, we have all the scandals in this country, and this is a fact! Please understand these are the sentiments of the ordinary people on the street.

I have time and again warned the government that the implementation of the GST would cause a number of street protests and even work-related strikes in 2015; therefore, Najib has to take heed of the voice of the people, instead of playing the oblivious game.

As if adding salt to the wound, the video clip produced by the Royal Customs and Excise

Department, which has gone viral on social media after it was broadcast on news portals, is in fact, viewed as “distasteful” for many.

For their creativity, I would give them the thumbs-up, but I question the ‘timeliness’ of releasing the video clip. Instead of addressing controversial issues why sardines are charged GST, whereas the lobsters are not, these officers appeared happily singing away about the GST, while many of us have to tighten our belts.

Many of would give the Royal Customs office the top notch if they had managed to frequently bust syndicates which smuggle in luxury cars, tobacco products and other items into the country without paying the duties.

With all this adding up, will this be the last straw for Najib and the entire BN coalition?

Popularity dipping

With his popularity already plunging to an all-time low after the jailing of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, Najib will certainly face greater pressure when the people are crying foul over the GST.

Even if Anwar Ibrahim’s jailing did not strike a chord with most people’s life-strings, the GST would! If it affects their livelihood, see if they would not hit the streets!

According to a report, over 38 percent of the population fall beneath the poverty line income of RM860 per month. This includes people in Sabah and Sarawak.

The logic is that if only 15 percent of the population are able to pay income tax, then 85 percent of the population will be affected by the GST.

We are a middle-income nation. This means that, apart from the people living below the poverty line, many of us will also be facing hardships trying to make ends meet.

The younger generation of Malaysians, who have to start out in life, with a ‘freshie’ income after graduation, and the need to own a medium-cost apartment and a second-hand car, would be badly affected.

If the game plan was to make sure that they now have to work harder or take on second jobs, to stop them from street demonstrations, the strategy would prove counter-productive.

With the dragnet now out, and over a hundred people have been harassed, arrested and remanded, Najib’s popularity, and along with it, the entire Barisan Nasional government that he represents, will eventually have to face the backlash.

According to Dr Lim Teck Ghee, the director of think-tank Centre for Policy Initiatives, the spate of arrests would “stiffen the resolve of party supporters and given them more reason

to stay the course of getting BN out of power.”

When editors and the chief executive of The Malaysian Insider were arrested for allegedly publishing an article relating to the hudud, Najib cannot expect these people and the entire fraternity of journalists, whether local or international, to sit still.

From now on, Najib can expect to receive more brickbats. Najib’s popularity does not depend on the 160 Umno divisional leaders who gave him the support. It goes beyond these Umno leaders, many of whom are not even the people’s elected representatives.

I would be surprised if the Umno faction loyal to former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad will not seize the opportunity now to further pressure Najib to step down in his sixth year as the sixth prime minister of Malaysia.

Economic hardships

The GST will be a burden for majority of Malaysians. Based on my observations on May 1 last year, it will be the bumiputra Malays and East Malaysians, who are already living below the poverty level, who will be worst affected by the economic hardships.

If salaries are not raised immediately to counter the effects of rising cost of living, and pressures of life escalate, it may lead to a series of work-related strikes that are eventually linked to the GST. This is one reason why the BN may suffer a bigger backlash in the coming general election.

The implementation of GST is not as easy as one would like it to be, especially when people’s livelihood is affected especially when the people’s salaries are small and most households are saddled with huge debts.

A good lesson that Najib should learn is what happened in Hong Kong, where consultation over a period of nine months was carried out by the then-finance secretary, Henry Tang.

Although the government was initially adamant to implement the GST as a value-added tax in Hong Kong, the plan was dropped on Dec 5, 2006.

Tang admitted that the government had collected 2,200 written submission in the first five months of consultation, with 65 percent opposing the plan, while the other 30 percent were in favour.

According to analysts, the withdrawal was made three days after Chinese state leader, Wu Bangguo who told senior Hong Kong officials “to keep their fingers on the pulse of the people” and to foster “social harmony”.

In the Hong Kong context, this merely involved some 6,000 people who participated in the first protest against GST organised by the Liberal Party on Aug 7 that year, and another 500 on Aug 20.

Is Najib listening hard enough?

I see it fit to share this piece of legacy from Charlie Chaplin. If he had lived on, he would be 126 years old today. These are his three statements which every one of us can relate to, given the present economic hardships and political uncertainties that we now face:

Statement One: Nothing is permanent in this world, not even our troubles.

Statement Two: I like walking in the rain, because nobody can see my tears.

Statement Three: The most wasted day in life is the day in which we have not laughed.

I wonder, with the GST and the spate of arrests going on, who will have the last laugh - Najib or the people who want to bring him down!

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