

DPM lends a little help to Dr M, indirectly

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By Terence Netto

COMMENT Indirection is the mode of Malay discourse, in politics as in anything else.

In politics especially, it's difficult to bring off: too much one way or too far the other will see the discourser careening into error and irrelevance.

But, then, politics is the art of the possible, just the sort of medium that lends itself to the skill limned by the poet Emily Dickinson when she advised: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant/ Success in circuit lies/Too bright for our infirm delight/The truth's superb surprise."

Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin (left) yesterday put a fine gloss on the art of nuanced disagreement when he quoted a Quranic verse that counsels truth-telling via temperate tones.

The occasion for Muhyiddin's finesse in diplomatically couched dissent was a Malay literary event.

It was just the sort of function that is conducive to the ambiguity in which the Umno deputy president has chosen to cloak his stances on the raging issues of the day - the foaming scandal engulfing sovereign wealth fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), and the identity of the person who ordered the killing of Mongolian damsel Altantuya Shaaribuu.

Artists are licensed to juggle with ambiguity which was what Muhyiddin employed when he graced the literary event.

The Umno deputy president took the opportunity to quote from a poem, Berkata-berkatalah (Do speak, but do it delicately) by national laureate Muhammad Salleh, which in itself is an ode to free speech and the necessity of finely nuanced language as a vehicle for a people's progress.

Muhyiddin proceeded to blend the poem's noble purpose with the wisdom of a Quranic verse that urges delicacy when it comes to truth-telling, especially when it concerns a matter that is likely to upset higher-ups.

He urged his audience to always strive for the truth in what they write but to do it in a way that draws the sting out of truth-telling and makes the listener reform rather than recoil.

Given his people's susceptibility to wisdom from the Levant, to the unfortunate exclusion of streams from elsewhere, Muhyiddin could perhaps have leveraged further on the occasion by also citing an Arabic proverb that says, "Only your enemies tell you what you want to hear; your friends tell you the truth."

But that may be going too far (see what is meant by the observation that writers are licensed to juggle with ambiguity).

Delicate position

Muhyiddin is in perhaps the most delicate position in Malaysian politics at this moment, where he has to tread a fine line between manifest fealty to his boss and mandatory fidelity to higher principles like accountability.

Thus far Muhyiddin has wavered between traditional expressions of support a deputy should give his superior and the merest projection of doubt.

In the past week, following relentless attacks by former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad on incumbent PM Najib Abdul Razak's handling of economic and moral issues, Muhyiddin's stance has smacked of craven prevarication than principled positioning.

An Umno deputy president is always in a delicate position when it comes to blunders made by the party's supremo: he must not seem to criticise the boss but he must free himself from the onus of collective responsibility.

While most of the rest of the party, in these straits, can and does abjectly resemble what may be called the political equivalent of the Vienna Boys Choir, the deputy chief must strive to seem like a loyal lieutenant but one that declines to walk the plank.

This role resembles a high wire trapeze act in a circus where the performer has to tread a fine line, as a tilt either way invites disaster.

It is an impossible situation: three deputy presidents under Mahathir's 22-year presidency of Umno - Musa Hitam, Ghaffar Baba and Anwar Ibrahim - sailed to their doom which was confirmation of the lethal vulnerability of the role.

As scandals engulf his boss, Muhyiddin has gone from pleas that Najib be allowed the latitude to carry out his vision for the country to the merest expressions of doubt about his boss's trajectory.

Twice in recent days, he has abandoned equivocation for subtle re-positioning in apparent deference to the rising public clamour and Mahathir's insistence on straight talk from the PM.

The first was when he told Mahathir that he was "not alone" in his opposition to war waged by the superpowers in pursuit of hegemony.

Mahathir, in his diatribe against Najib, had earlier observed that he knew he was alone in criticising what he said was Najib's leading the country to the precipice.

Muhyiddin had used the expression in a way that resonated with Mahathir's strictures.

Then yesterday in telling Malay literati that they should speak the truth but, as the Quran and Dickinson suggested, "tell it slant", Umno's deputy head has signalled that the PM does not have his deputy's vote in his pocket - the way Umno once regarded the Malay vote.

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