

Analyst: Cross protest a crossroad for Najib

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By Nigel Aw

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has earned praise for his swift response on the protest which demanded a church in Taman Medan to take down its cross. But the true measure of his leadership will have to extend beyond a mere statement.

This is reminiscent of the infamous "cow head" protest in 2009, just four months after Najib took over from his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

After condemning the protest within 24 hours, the prime minister did nothing to rein in his cousin and then home minister Hishammuddin Hussein (right) who defended the protesters.

The protesters, comprising Umno members, objected to the planned construction of a Hindu temple in Section 23, Shah Alam and used the cow head, deemed sacred to Hindus, to put their message across.

Hishammuddin went as far as meeting with the protesters and posing for photographs with them at a press conference, stressing that the group wanted its voice heard.

In the end, the protesters were let off with a slap on the wrist, with 12 walking away with a RM1,000 fine while the one who carried the cow head was jailed for a week and fined RM3,000.

None of them faced any disciplinary action from Umno.

"Looking at the history of the current prime minister, he is very good at making statements but has been a complete failure in exerting leadership," noted think tank Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas) chief executive Wan Saiful Wan Jan.

"In time, we will see if the statement is only a token purely to address the possible political repercussions or if the government is serious about doing something," he told Malaysiakini.

However, for a start, current Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi has taken a tough stance against the protesters this time, declaring their actions to be seditious and promising action.

Selangor Umno chief Noh Omar appeared to 'disown' the protesters, insisting they are NGO and not Umno members, even though they are attached with the Petaling Jaya Selatan Umno including the party's former election candidate for Taman Medan.

'Leadership beyond elections'

Wan Saiful (left) agreed that a "cynical view" was that unlike the cow head protest, the anti-cross protest also angered voters in East Malaysia which has a substantial Christian population.

Already East Malaysians have taken to social media to express outrage at the incident which they said would never happen in Sabah or Sarawak.

With the Sarawak election due the latest 2016, it is in the interest of the ruling coalition to act swiftly and meticulously with regard to this fiasco.

Najib in a statement yesterday had said police would take action against the protesters, possibly under the Sedition Act.

Wan Saiful said the measure of whether Najib's actions is only for narrow electoral interest or genuine leadership would depend on whether he would instruct Umno to take disciplinary action against the errant members or wash his hands by leaving it to the police.

"I don't think legal action is the right one, as a political party, if Umno itself does not act against them, then it is just hot air," said the analyst, who disagrees with the Sedition Act.

Wan Saiful said this is necessary as a follow up to a "good first step" by Najib to dissociate Umno, which has been drifting to the right, from such provocative elements.

"This (anti-cross protest) is happening because in the last few years, the prime minister has failed to dissociate his party and leadership from similar actions like this," he said.

He added that while distancing Umno from such protests may be at the expense of support from the right-wing, the party would ultimately want to capture the middle ground which comprise majority voters.