

Dr M-Najib fight spirals out of control

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By Terence Netto

COMMENT The unremitting battle between Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has now overflowed domestically to reach the pages of the New York Times (NYT).

Foreign Minister Anifah Aman has taken to the letters column of the NYT to denounce Mahathir's washing of allegedly fabricated linen in overseas media outlets.

Anifah's letter is in presumable response to adverse comments made by Mahathir to the NYT on the imbroglio surrounding sovereign wealth fund, IMDB, and other issues affecting Prime Minister Najib Razak.

In an interview with the NYT, Mahathir has described Najib's conduct as verging on the "criminal", a term that must have prompted Anifah's epistolary response which contains the accusation that it was Mahathir who created the "yes men" culture in Umno, a charge that is certain to beget another round of bitter recrimination in an already acrimonious tussle between the ex-PM and the sitting one.

Reverberations of domestic disputes in foreign capitals are a sign that the crisis has raged past the point of local containment; it is the closest thing one could have to confirmation that the contretemps has gone beyond the bounds amenable to mediation and negotiation.

In times past, Umno-BN leaders would lambast opposition politicians whenever the latter spoke badly about the government in foreign councils and shores.

This practice of hanging dirty linen out to dry in foreign forums has come in for a bad rap in domestic circles since the time Australian Labor Party leader Arthur Calwell hailed Lee Kuan Yew as a progressive leader during a visit by the PAP chief Down Under in the mid-1960s when Singapore was part of the federation.

"But he has some tough nuts to crack in Umno," quipped Calwell, whose remarks touched off a barrage of criticism of Lee from Umno types at the time.

Thus began the era in Malaysian politics where domestic critics who vent their spleen about their country in foreign circles are held up to the opprobrium reserved for fornicating preachers and shady scientists: they are told that their betrayals consign them to the lower rungs of the social totem pole.

Even when these criticisms are uttered by somebody of nonpartisan stature such as Suffian Hashim (photo), the former Lord President who in 1990 told a Singapore audience that had sought his views on the judicial crisis involving Salleh Abbas's impeachment in 1988, that

the average Umno leader cared only for his Mercedes Benz and other perks, the reaction is unseemly adverse.

In recent months, with respect to Mahathir's differences with Najib on the IMBD issue, the former PM has made similar remarks about the moral fibre of Umno leaders to that made by Suffian to his Singapore audience a quarter century ago.

Marking a nadir in relations

Mahathir joined in the imprecations hurled against Suffian at the time of former judicial chief's oft-repeated public dismay at what had happened to Salleh Abbas and how it marked a nadir in relations between the executive and the judiciary in Malaysia.

The issue of the morality of berating one's country abroad aside, the spilling of the crisis between Mahathir and Najib in the newspaper of record in America represents the first time a local conflagration has generated publicity in far away places.

On the Richter scale of political earthquakes, this dispute is not far short of 10.

Previously, reverberations from domestic political earthquakes would only register in one or two Asean capitals, Jakarta more likely than the others, because of ties of language and kinship between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Even then, interest in Jakarta in what some luminary from Malaysia says about someone under interdiction in Kuala Lumpur would not bulk large in the public estimation.

One remembers the derision that Ghafar Baba was subjected to when he went to the Indonesian capital to explain the action taken by Mahathir against Anwar Ibrahim in late 1998 after the PM had sacked his deputy from government and Umno and had him charged with corruption and sodomy.

Ghafar (photo) hurriedly returned home after he reacted caustically to Indonesian cynicism about the accusations against Anwar by saying that Malaysia did not want leaders of Anwar's alleged sexual orientation but that if Indonesia did, Malaysia would be glad to offer them to its neighbour.

The remarks caused a furore that was doused only by Ghafar's swift exit from the Indonesian capital and Wisma Putra's backroom diplomacy at mollifying ruffled Indonesian feathers.

Malaysia's domestic imbroglios usually do not resonate in capitals beyond the Asean perimeter, but the IMDB contretemps, due to the transnational reach of its money trails and the subterranean alleyways in which some of its operatives appear to have forged its schemes, is the juiciest thing to have happened since sovereign wealth funds became a matter of interest to unelected business coterie blithely unmindful of French novelist Honore de Balzac's warning - that behind every great fortune there lies a crime.

For these reasons, 1MDB has become an issue whose reverberations have drawn the attention of the NYT, still the biggest name among newspapers of record.

Now Umno and all its linen are out on the international washing line, a dubious distinction in this the 69th year of its founding.

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