

Zahid a one-trick pony set to lead Najib nowhere

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COMMENT If there is a one-trick pony in Malaysian politics, it's Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

He's got only one trick up his sleeve and it's a sledgehammer which he is pleased to deploy, especially when he's got his back to the wall.

That a politician of his dearth of skills can rise to the No 2 position in the country is a sad commentary on the state of affairs in an Umno that has dominated Malaysia's politics to its detriment since independence.

That this dominance has brought the country to decay can be seen from the contagion of controversies that presently beset it.

The distresses have reached a point where the only way out is for the No 1 man to exit office, but this is not to say that the No 2 should then take over.

The sober-minded know that often in politics, the choice is not between good and better; more commonly, it is between the undesirable and the intolerable.

But in the case of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and his deputy, the selection is between the intolerable and the execrable.

No, this isn't saying that that's the choice we are faced with. It's that both leaders in combination have succeeded in dividing the country between those who want to be freed of stupidity and those in whose material interest it is to support a benighted tyranny.

Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Zahid certified this division through the banning notice he issued yesterday against the wearing of the yellow Bersih T-shirts whose sales have been brisk the past week.

Yellow a colour of resonant significance

The yellow of Bersih has been a colour of resonant significance since Queen Elizabeth (photo) used a yellow dress with a yellow floral arrangement in the backdrop of a reception hall in Buckingham Palace when the English monarch received Najib and wife Rosmah Mansor who were on a state visit when Bersih were planning their second march a few years back.

Yellow, contrary to its nominal significance as an emblem of cowardice, has become in the protest march parlance in Malaysia the colour of defiance and even subtlety.

The rapid turnover in T-short sales and the reported RM2 million in collections by Bersih for this their fourth protest march planned for today and tomorrow must have caused panic in government ranks.

Panic is not something that is calculated to bring out the best in the government.

Accustomed to bringing out the mailed fist when under duress, the government has relied on the home minister for its final thrust to foil today's gathering by Bersih when all other devices for heading off the protest had failed.

The government had tried subterfuge, offers of alternative venues, and there was the threat of anti-Bersih action by vigilante groups which was quickly retracted, and, lastly, the resort to a warning by the Armed Forces chief that the military will intervene if an emergency is declared in the event of disturbances.

Liable to compensatory action by victims

Even an attack imputing disloyalty by Bersih in wanting to stage their protest on the eve of the annual Merdeka Day commemoration failed to make a dent on their determination to go ahead.

When all these variations on a general theme of dissuasion proved of no avail, in stepped the home minister with the only prohibitive weapon he has in his arsenal – a banning of the yellow Bersih T-shirts.

How efficacious this ban is going to be can be inferred somewhat from what retired judge Gopal Sri Ram (photo) has said about the extent of the ambit of the Printing and Publications Act under which the banning order was issued.

The former jurist who has returned to legal practice has been vocal in recent years in pointing out legal niceties which in the case of yesterday's banning order, does not include T-shirts in its ambit.

In an opinion that may well stay the hand of the banning authority, the learned lawyer contends that arrests of yellow Bersih T-shirt wearers would be liable to compensatory action by the victims.

If this is true, Zahid may have bitten off more than he can chew. He's had plenty of practice for this overreach.

Two years ago, almost to the month, the home minister made headlines, when in the face of rising instances of gangland shootings, he said police would shoot first and leave the ask questions for later.

It was a stance of breathtaking insolence. For if he has stubbed his legal toe in the dark of trying to thwart the Bersih 4 march, he will have asked for it.

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