

**A gamble which Najib lost badly**  
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COMMENT So, it's finally final. No legalised sports betting. After all that vacillating and humming and hawing, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has come out to say the Finance Ministry has withdrawn the approval it had initially given to Ascot Sports Sdn Bhd.

He even admitted that approval was indeed given - but only "in principle" - confirming something he had sought to evade on June 15 when he said no licence had been awarded to Ascot Sports.

Revoking the approval is bad form, of course. What we would call buruk siku - taking something back after giving. It doesn't augur well for the government as the public will view this as another of its flip-flops. In the last couple of years, the government has been flip-flopping so often, it cannot be seen to be in total control.

azlanWhy, one must ask, was it so hasty in granting the licence in the first place? Why did it, in these volatile political times, agree to legalising sports betting when an issue like that would inevitably raise a hue and cry in public?

Did Najib and his BN colleagues not weigh the odds and realise that the issue would be politicised? Did they not foresee that the opposition would latch on to it for political gain and threaten to stage a mammoth rally against this endorsement of gambling? That it would cast BN in a negative light, especially among the Muslim electorate? That even a party like the DAP would use it to win Malay-Muslim hearts?

Had BN become too confident about its having won back adequate Malay support that it could gamble on something like this? Or was BN trying to win non-Malay support since legalised sports betting would have been meant only for non-Muslims?

Even ministers like Mohd Nazri Abdul Aziz and Rais Yatim were going around touting that legalising it would be showing respect for the rights of non-Muslims - even though you'd have to swallow what they said with a cupful of salt.

Surely, it was not just the World Cup tournament that triggered the move to legalise sports betting even though the foreseen pickings might have been substantial. Was the government desperate for the revenue it could derive from the legalisation because the nation's coffers are dwindling?

And if so, did it not wonder about how it would look to be profiting from non-Muslims through an activity that Muslims would frown upon? On that score, wouldn't the issues of religion and morality inevitably crop up?

#### Government half-truths

Now that the whole thing's been called off, most people would probably not lament that Ascot Sports is the party that has been hard done by, given that its owners have been subject to much criticism, especially in political blogs and online news websites, but the fact remains that the public image of the government has taken a beating with this faux pas. And the fact remains that the company that had been promised the deal has been unfairly treated.

It doesn't matter what the company is; the point is, reneging on a deal already concluded is unbecoming, especially if the party that has failed to keep its end of the bargain is the government. How does one have faith in a party that actually breaks its word?

The government has recently prided itself on being one that gets public feedback first before implementing any policy or going ahead with a project. Thus, it has supposedly taken its time over the final release of the New Economic Model. If that's the case, why did it not get public feedback first before proceeding with giving the approval to Ascot Sports?

It has also not helped the government's cause that it offered half-truths when the controversy was raging. On June 12, Ascot Sports publicly revealed that it had already got the approval from the finance minister, i.e. Najib. But on June 15, when he was questioned by the media, Najib said no licence had been issued.

Without splitting semantic hairs, we have to say that an approval is an approval, and even if Najib was not wrong in saying that no licence had been issued, he could have admitted that the approval had already been given but the issuance of the licence was still pending.

By being equivocal in his statement, he kept the public in suspense, thereby further fuelling the anxiety and confusion that was already building up.

In hindsight, we might say that it was obviously a damage-control measure. As the issue was out in the open and the feedback was negative, Najib had to be cagey in case the issue turned sour. He was also playing for time to see which way public opinion would eventually go. In other words, he wasn't steadfast in his ruling. This looked like a case of leadership uncertainty.

Who's in charge?

As it turned out, even with coalition partners MCA and MIC coming out to defend legalising sports betting, it took the bigger voice of Umno to call the shots.

What really must have hurt Najib was the first salvo fired by Johor Umno, which issued a categorical objection on June 13. This was later followed by Umno of Kedah and Perak. Umno Youth, although it uncharacteristically took some time to decide, also joined the fray.

A telling indication from this entire episode is that Najib is not in full control of the party he heads. Neither does he enjoy its full backing to do what he wants.

What is even more demeaning for him is that the final decision for revoking the sports betting approval was made by the Umno supreme council. Considering that it was the government, as represented not just by Umno but also other BN partners, that had given the approval, it should have been the government that made the decision. Since it was not so, the message that comes through is clear.

BN is not really in charge of the government. Umno is. And as it looks from here, neither is Najib.