

The angst that comes with being No 2
Malaysiakini.com
August 12, 2010

COMMENT Most deputy premiers and vice-presidents would want to succeed to the No 1 post - most, save Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Ghafar Baba and Dick Cheney.

The three were content being No 2. That was why their No 1s were happy to have them as second-in-command: they could sleep unperturbed that no conspiracies were being hatched to oust them.

Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein was reported to have mused forlornly, "Now whom can I trust?" when Ismail died rather suddenly in August 1973.

Razak immediately positioned a relative, Hussein Onn, at No 2, for more insulation perhaps, against the vaulting ambitions of Ghazali Shafie and the rising popularity of Harun Idris.

Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's affirmation of loyalty to his No 1, Najib Razak, is only the latest edition of the tribulations the No 2 position is heir to.

Najib's using an underling, Mohd Nazri Abdul Aziz, to acknowledge his deputy's competency in the acting prime ministerial role he assayed while Najib was on leave, is a game of smoke and mirrors, the preferred device of the cagey when dealing with slippery situations.

To be sure, the deputy's role is anomalous: its demand that one be simultaneously loyal and capable of succeeding to the No 1 job requires an equipoise that is very difficult to bring off. Hence the perennial existential angst that comes with being No 2.

Its difficulties notwithstanding, it's a necessary role. Imagine the scramble that would break out if No1 suddenly expires without a designated No 2 in place.

Oxymoronic as its requisites can be, the deputy's is a critical role, and not just in democracies. In one-party states too, it is crucial.

Witness the way President Fidel Castro positioned brother Raul to succeed before going off for specialist medical treatment for a life-threatening problem. Now when it appears he is fit and restored, he is easing back into the Cuban public frame - no sibling rivalry there to worry about.

The fact of the matter is that ever since March 15, 44 BC, when 67 senators of the Roman Republic murdered Julius Caesar, the question of who is in the No 2 position has acquired a weighty importance in political history.

From the time of that murder, except in situations when polity-founding leaders such as a Mao, Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, Tito or Mandela were at the helm, the dispositions of the No 2 are a matter of major concern to the No 1, the most recent depiction of this reality was seen in South African President Thabo Mbeki's discomfort vis-a-vis Jacob Zuma.

Smart solution

When Shakespeare observed that "uneasy is the head that wears the crown," the comment was taken as not just confined to worry over complex matters of governance of the realm; what's roiling in the second tier was assumed as part of what can disturb the equanimity of the numero uno.

The Americans contrived a smart solution: they opted in the 1940s for term limits to the No 1 job, thereby making covetousness on the part of the No 2 pointless.

Otherwise the acerbic assessment of John Nance Garner, one of Franklin Roosevelt's vice-presidents in his four-term presidential reign, about the worth of the No 2 position would have acquired cocktail party immortality: "Not worth a pitcher of warm piss."

Since then the US vice-presidency has progressively shed its nondescript qualities. Recent holder Cheney and incumbent Joe Biden have had functions with more cachet than the merely ceremonial.

Without term limits on the No 1 position, the frustration of cooling one's heels in the No 2 role would be destructively gnawing. No doubt Britain's Gordon Brown will have plenty to say about this in his memoirs.

But not all long occupations of the No 2 position have been destructive to the incumbent. Anwar Sadat was a seemingly insignificant No 2 to charismatic Jamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt from 1954 to 1970, only to emerge after his predecessor's death to become a pivotal figure in peace-making in the Middle East.

What was his secret? A bit of somnambulism no doubt; it helps to pare the No 1's anxieties. But more importantly, it would have been the ability to keep every fiber of stifled intuition intact, for reconstituting and unleashing once you have reached the top of the greasy pole.

In short, the art of keeping a dead person walking - a conjuror's art.

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/139836>