

A Rubicon crossed, but will it help Najib?
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COMMENT The prime minister's spirit appears willing but his administration's flesh may be weak.

Najib Razak is apparently willing to go an impressive distance in recovering for BN the Chinese votes that deserted them in droves at the last general election and stayed away in several by-elections since. But the rest of his government or even Umno may be too weak to follow suit.

Truth be told, Najib's acknowledgement of the contributions of Chinese Malaysians to the country's development, voiced at the MCA-organised Chinese Economic Congress on Saturday, must rank as the frankest, and most sweeping, ever made by an Umno president.

When one salutes Chinese Malaysians, as the PM did, for their "industry, expertise and dedication" and acknowledges that these qualities were integral to the Malaysian success story, one just about retires that 'pendatang' canard for good.

Rhetorically, at least a Rubicon has been crossed.

NONE After this, it will be difficult for an Umno president to cast aspersions about 'birds of passage' when referring to the country's second biggest ethnic community.

Needless to say, Najib's acknowledgement is not likely to endear him to Malay political pressure group Perkasa. Neither will it win him points with Dr Mahathir Mohamed, censorious guardian of all that is supposed to be necessary for an Umno president to safeguard for the Malay race.

As acknowledgements of historical realities go, the near-equivalents of Najib's doffing of the hat to the Chinese Malaysian contribution would be if the Sri Lankan President did the same vis-a-vis Jaffna Tamils, or if a suddenly revenant Idi Amin touched his forelock in deference to Uganda's Indians whom he expelled in the 1970s.

Words not enough

But Najib's crossing of a personal and party Rubicon would only go so far as to expunge from memory his inflammatory part in an Umno Youth demonstration in Kuala Lumpur on October 18, 1987, when blood-curdling threats were uttered against Chinese Malaysians.

In retrospect, Najib's participation in that incendiary event may be dismissed as an aberration in the career of a politician not really inclined to racist demagoguery.

Still, the event remains as an unsettling reminder of how easy it is for some to yield to the temptation of race-baiting. After last Saturday, that temptation would be less easy to succumb to.

But it is doubtful whether Najib's acknowledgement would entice the Chinese vote back to BN. And that is because of something Dr Mahathir observed about the way the Chinese vote.

NONE He said in 1999 when Malay resentment towards him was running high over his

sacking and public humiliation of Anwar Ibrahim, that the Chinese, unlike Malays, voted with their heads, not with their hearts.

Presently, there are obstacles of rationality and of sentiment to the return of the Chinese vote to BN.

Has the Chinese vote ever been courted before as sedulously as it is now by both the BN and Pakatan Rakyat? Why would they want to alter this propitious situation?

Moreover, while the PM has assured the family of the late Teoh Beng Hock of justice, that prospect, pace the latest developments in the case, is more elusive than ever. A just resolution of the case is non-negotiable to the Chinese.

Hence both rationality and sentiment argue for a hewing of the Chinese vote to its present-perfect scenario.

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