



Does the PM have the courage of conviction?
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COMMENT If you were wondering if Prime Minister Najib Razak has the gumption to fight for his beliefs, wonder no more.

He has just admitted that politics is a matter of being in the right camp, as otherwise the consequences, even if you are competent, could be "quite tragic".

Speaking at the Perdana Leadership Conference dialogue session yesterday, the PM gave his audience a peek into his mindset: politics for him is a matter of competence wedded to expedient choice of camps in which to travel up the ladder of the party you are in.

Isn't politics also about beliefs, about a worldview, and the methods by which to transmute those into reality?

If they are, you would not be able to infer that from Najib's response to a question that drew him out at the dialogue session.

The question that prompted his response which exposed his political outlook had to do with whether Najib ever felt like throwing in the towel.

One could imagine where the questioner was coming from.

Given the widespread perception that Najib has a fight on his hands within Umno with regard to his programme of policy reform and party and government renovation, people are wondering if he has courage of conviction to back his calculation of what it would take to get government, party and country out of the rut.

The question has arisen because his proposed reforms such as the New Economic Model (NEM), which is supposed to be a major overhaul of the dysfunctional four-decade-old New Economic Policy (NEP), are being stymied by opposition from within Umno.

As a result, people are wondering if the PM has the guts to fight this opposition, or otherwise cajole and beguile it into supporting his view of what it would take to get Umno-BN out of the boondocks.

Already, the PM is seen to waver in his resolution to match deed to promise. The NEM's framework was announced to fanfare earlier this year but by the time of the 10th Malaysia Plan's unveiling in June, the new merit-based scheme of economic betterment all but disappeared in the folds of the 10MP which were deferential to the NEP.

This dilution, some say disappearance, was attributed to opposition from Malay pressure group, Perkasa, which was formed by maverick politician Ibrahim Ali and backed by Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the once modernist but now obscurantist former PM.

Near defeat in Pekan

Not a lot ought to be taken as definitive of a leader from off-the-cuff responses at a conference session. But it does tell something of Najib that when asked for anecdotal

evidence of his indomitability or its lack in his past, he cited his experience of near defeat in the 1999 general election.

In that poll he scraped through by a whisker in his bailiwick of Pekan. He attributed his near defeat to "collateral damage" from Mahathir's sacking of then deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998.

Umno suffered sharp reverses in the 1999 general election as the hitherto preferred party of the Malays lost 20 Malay majority parliamentary seats and were ousted from the Terengganu state legislature in addition to being kept out of Kelantan. Those reverses prompted the withdrawal of Mahathir from the premiership in 2003.

Najib fought back to win by a thumping 10,000-plus majority in the 2004 election, which was seen as the people's endorsement for the new broom of Abdullah Badawi's administration.

But when Umno-BN stuttered to a loss of its rarely imperiled two-thirds majority in the 2008 polls, Najib bucked the overall pattern of reverses by increasing his winning majority in Pekan, an impressive feat.

All this, he said, was wrought by hard work, by self-belief. No talk of any soldiering on from the 1999 near disaster by dint of convictions based on a worldview.

For the PM, on the basis of extempore remarks he made yesterday, politics is a matter of expedient alignments and shrewd, even doughty, management.

A watching public should know that to this PM at least, bucking an opposing force, even one of conjectural strength, is not on the cards. But setbacks are met - and reversed - with managerial fortitude and patience.

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