

Time for Karpal to get pragmatic
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That DAP veteran politician Karpal Singh is being accused of making seditious remarks for questioning the authority of the Perak sultan is not surprising. It's clearly a tactic of intimidation used by Umno to try to gain political mileage amongst the Malay population. MCPX

What is surprising is the initial lack of support for Karpal among his own party. So much so that even Karpal himself had questioned the 'silence' of his colleagues.

karpal singh pc on perak sultan 090508 01Karpal's 'assault' on the royalty began earlier last month when he criticised the crown prince of Kelantan for saying that no one should raise questions regarding Malay rights. Karpal upped the ante a few weeks later when he asserted that the Perak sultan had acted unconstitutionally by forcing the Perak mentri besar to reinstate the director of the state's religious department.

While we think that the points made by Karpal about royal intervention – or activism, in some cases – may be valid ones (and ones which we ourselves have raised in previous podcasts), the fact of the matter is that the other DAP leaders have realised that taking on the royalty is a losing proposition, especially in the case concerning Sultan Azlan Shah, who is very popular.

On the whole, the non-Malays are not overly concerned about the role that the sultans are currently playing in the political scene. While some of them may have been unhappy with what happened in Perak and Selangor regarding the appointment of the MB in the former and the composition of the executive council in the latter, it is safe to say that non-Malays are more concerned with the larger issues of economic security, the New Economic Policy, corruption, religious freedom and so on. Not royal activism. Pushing the royalty issue won't win the DAP much additional support among the non-Malay community.

On the other hand, it will lose it – and Pakatan, by association – considerable Malay support. Many Malays have reacted negatively towards what they perceive as an attack on one of the central institutions representing Malay identity and culture. Even if Karpal vehemently denies that he is anti-royalty, his actions will undoubtedly be interpreted as such among the Malays.

This, despite the fact that many Umno leaders, at the state and federal level, made far more critical remarks against the Terengganu sultan, who is also the current king, when he refused to allow Idris Jusoh to become the MB of Terengganu.

While DAP supremo Lim Kit Siang has criticised Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for threatening to charge Karpal with sedition, this came a little late in the game. Kit Siang also did not explicitly support Karpal's criticism of royal intervention in Perak.

No doubt, Kit Siang has learned from his recent experience of asking the DAP state assembly representatives to boycott the swearing-in of the PAS MB and the backlash he faced from that action. He has clearly recognised that taking on the royalty is a non-winner.

The loose cannons in DAP, PAS

This episode points towards a larger tension within Pakatan. There are clearly issues which all sides within Pakatan need to take a more moderate stance on, especially DAP and PAS. Just as attacking the royalty is a losing strategy for the DAP, raising the specter of an Islamic state is also a losing proposition for PAS.

Kit Siang has shied away from attacking the royalty, just as Abdul Hadi Awang has avoided mention of implementing an Islamic state. These are two pragmatists who understand what's at stake here, which is the possible takeover of the government by Pakatan. Karpal and PAS spiritual advisor, Nik Aziz Nik Mat, in contrast, seem to be a little divorced from reality. Their occasional war of words does Pakatan no good at all.

Karpal's insistence on holding his ground on the royalty issue has resulted in the DAP central executive committee coming out with a strong statement of support. This includes a call for other Pakatan MPs to support Karpal on this matter as well. This, no doubt, is something that PAS and even certain members of PKR may be hesitant to do because of the fear that it would be perceived as being anti-royalty and by extension, anti-Malay.

With PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim holding the middle ground and with other DAP and PAS leaders holding back the more extreme elements within their respective parties, Pakatan should be able to ride through these problems. But as long as leaders such as Karpal and Nik Aziz continue to raise no-win issues, these tensions within Pakatan are likely to continue to bubble to the surface.

For politically pragmatic reasons, these two stalwarts would do well to shy away from issues that gain them little political mileage from their core constituents yet loses them support from the other side – support that Pakatan needs especially as it moves closer to forming the next government.