

Could this be BN's last own goal?
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The possibility of a political crackdown as Sept 16 draws near was always likely as were discussions that some kind of emergency might be declared. But the manner in which the latest crackdown was implemented has only accentuated Barisan Nasional's weaknesses and highlighted Pakatan Rakyat's growing momentum.

BN has a remarkable ability to score own goals. Just like Wes Brown's own goal ultimately cost Manchester United the match against Liverpool, this latest own goal could very well be the final straw that tips the scales of BN, allowing Pakatan to take over.

It is hard to imagine that the latest ISA arrests would have helped BN politically. Take, for example, Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar's assertion that the police were acting on their own orders and not his. At best, people might think he was shirking responsibility over an unpopular action. At worst, it leaves the impression that BN leaders are not in control of the instruments of power in this country.

A weak and internally-divided Umno would only encourage BN parliamentarians, especially those from East Malaysia, to seriously contemplate jumping off a sinking ship, even those who had not seriously considered doing so before.

If the BN had wanted to give a strong warning to its MPs thinking of crossing over, they would have done better by taking a page out of the Dr Mahathir Mohamad playbook. Not to be taken as a sign of endorsement on our part, Mahathir's 'Operasi Lalang' in 1987 was a 'shock and awe' tactic that was designed to intimidate politicians and civil activists from all sides and stripes. And it worked.

isa 3 teresa raja petra tan hoon chengIn contrast, these three ISA arrests reek of desperation, of weakness, of a political establishment afraid of Anwar Ibrahim and his opposition Pakatan coalition. If anything, it had the opposite effect of Ops Lalang.

Initial reports that up to 15 people were supposed to have been hauled in under the ISA did not materialise. Subsequent rumblings that further arrests were quelled by the protests of a few government leaders only confirms the growing rifts within the Umno leadership and also within the BN component parties. No less than six ministers have come out publicly against the ISA.

A fracturing Umno and BN stand in contrast to a Pakatan that is united in its battle against the BN.

The choice of ISA arrests was also politically damaging to the BN. By arresting journalist Tan Hoon Cheng and not Umno chieftain Ahmad Ismail, the BN hardly endeared itself to the non-Malays. The subsequent arrest of Selangor senior exco Teresa Kok (and not ex-mentri besar Dr Mohd Khir Toyo) only fueled the impression – rightly or wrongly - that the BN was trying to instigate a Chinese backlash against the government and in doing so, inflame Malay sentiment.

In addition, the fact that a woman opposition MP was nabbed - another first under the

Abdullah administration - would only result in mobilising the anti-BN sentiment among women, especially non-Malay women, who have traditionally taken less of an overt interest in political activity and political mobilisation compared to their male counterparts.

penang anti isa candle light vigil 150908 04Kok cuts a much more sympathetic figure compared to someone like Lim Kit Siang. She does not have the same public image of being an 'extremist' among the Malay community (Utusan Malaysia notwithstanding) and public sympathy for her (and anger against the BN) has been heightened by the confirmation of the false 'azan' allegations. The mosques have already said it's not her fault.

The longer Kok stays under arrest, the greater her political 'standing' when she is finally released. The longer she stays under arrest, the more the BN will be portrayed as a political bully.

Lapdogs of Umno

That controversial blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin was arrested under the ISA would not have surprised many. Ironically, access to his website was unblocked at around the same time that he was arrested. RPK is hugely popular and is read by a wide swathe of Malaysians, not just non-Malays.

His arrest would only serve to incite some of the Malay ground against the BN and ensure that there would be some cross community protest against these arrests. (It also conveniently gives Anwar an excuse that he is fighting the ISA for all Malaysians as opposed to fighting for the release of members of only one community)

Parties which have been put under the most pressure by the ISA arrests are Gerakan and MCA. Already under pressure after the Ahmad Ismail remarks, Gerakan and MCA run the risk of being seen as politically irrelevant among the non-Malay community if they do not consider the previously unthinkable.

penang anti isa candle light vigil 150908 07Sidelined and ignored by an increasingly fractious Umno, leaders from these two parties are finding that no matter how much they shout or protest, their voices are not being heard within the halls of power in the BN. And worst still, everything they do is seen by their constituency as too little, too late.

If snap polls were announced today, Gerakan and MCA would be lucky to obtain even 20 percent of the non-Malay vote. While grassroots members in both parties - more so within Gerakan - are agitating to leave the BN, its leaders are still not willing to contemplate this action. The effect of which is the perception that they are the lapdogs of Umno.

The BN has gained little from the ISA arrests. It has shown itself to be divided internally. It has put aside any hope to regaining the non-Malay vote, to the detriment of MCA and Gerakan, whose leaders appear powerless to stop this. It has failed to regain any significant Malay support, perhaps because the Chinese backlash did not materialise (although people were dismayed, they stayed calm).

Finally, this episode has given Anwar and Pakatan more ammunition to form the next federal government, perhaps not on Sept 16, but in the not too distant future. Could this be BN's last own goal?

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