

Malaysia enters realpolitik era in days
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Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, an Islamic Studies graduate who wooed the Muslim vote bank piously and impressed them on his way to the top, has in the past said quite a number of extraordinary things in public, indeed on national television, with a straight face and done exactly the very opposite almost the very next day amidst nationwide sniggers and "I told you so".

Recent examples, which still rankle in the public memory, include the adjustments in fuel oil prices thrice in a row and the calling of the March 8 general elections despite denials to the contrary even the day before Parliament was dissolved.

He got married to his separated sister-in-law within days of denying he had any plans to do so. The 'shotgun' wedding raised more than a few eyebrows.

His plunging credibility and popularity rating has forced him to quietly drop his Islam Hadhari (civilisational Islam) platform but not before five opposition-ruled states banned this version of Islam within weeks of March 8 in a public display of contempt for his politicisation of the Faith.

Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in perhaps the last interview before he left office, said that he had set everything in place for the next leadership level and that Malaysia was well on its way to being the utopia he had promised by 2020. Prophetic words indeed!

"Abdullah came in with so much public goodwill after Mahathir left and now he has squandered all of it," say political analysts who charted his steady rise to the top through the lean years and the good ones.

"He rested on his laurels after the spectacular electoral performance of 2004 and betrayed the trust of the voters after making all sorts of promises. None of them have been carried out so far because they were all hype written by advertising copywriters who should stick to promoting soft drinks. Even the promised judicial reforms, reforms to the police, ACA and Election Commission are non-starters because he has no guts to take on the vested interests."

The thinking in the streets is: Why should his pledge not to use the ISA against opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim be any different from a history of broken pledges? "He has no credibility in the matter and those who accept his pledges are clutching at straws," is the common refrain, certainly cynicism, among the great majority of the sweaty, unwashed masses.

This is by no means calling the prime minister a congenital, or even pathological, liar. However, the fact remains that fast moving events in the past have forced him, a slow mover and slow thinker at best, into policy flip flops despite the risks of exposing himself to the continued humiliation of public ridicule.

"If you must call anyone a liar, pin it on the Fourth Floor boys," said a merchant banker in the know. "These four guys don't know what politics is all about and they, of all people, are advising the prime minister on everything, from his wardrobe and hair gel to economic

policies. Najib's appointment as finance minister will see their wings clipped somewhat."

Psychological war of nerves

Incarceration, whichever way, is expected to throw a spanner in the works for Anwar who has set his sights on seizing the reins of the federal government and shooing away Abdullah from the palatial official abode which he now occupies in Putrajaya and isolates himself from the people.

Speculation is rife that US Vice-President Dick Cheney, US State Secretary Condoleeza Rice and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, among others, have rung Anwar personally in the wake of Abdullah's remarks on the possibility of using the ISA against him, assuring him that 'nothing of that sort will be allowed to happen'.

Abdullah, cocooned in his own sense of self-importance in the unreal Mughal Empire splendour of Putrajaya, is not likely to be impressed by such pledges despite the harm that may befall the country's image and credit rating if he invokes the ISA.

"He is tempting fate like Aurangzeb, the last Mughal Emperor, who was bundled into exile in Burma unceremoniously by the English East India Company, of all the humiliating usurpers," said a history don who has read politics at the university.

The 'Abdullah must quit by Oct 9' movement is ostensibly driven by the theory that the Umno president will be humiliated if he makes a bid for the top party post in December "since he's likely to get very few nominations". This is a line that Abdullah's four-man team of advisors on all things temporal, looking increasingly vulnerable by the day, will not buy.

They are more likely to read Oct 9 as an attempt to stave off the collapse of the BN federal government by having Najib, or perhaps a dark horse, hastily sworn in as prime minister "to take the wind out of Anwar's sails".

Anwar himself, according to most schools of thought, made too much of the Sept 16 phenomenon, beating the drums of war in a psychological war of nerves, and lost valuable time. "He should have gone for a surgical precision strike immediately after being sworn in as the opposition leader," said a political secretary in Kuching who favours ditching the BN but not jumping on the Anwar bandwagon.

"This guy, having been fed on a Bollywood diet, loves to dwell on the theatrics too much for the entertainment value. No wonder he had himself photographed Rajnikanth-style as 'Anwar the Boss' – actually Bachelor in Social Science – in posters for his daughter (Nurul's) March 8 campaign in Lembah Pantai." (Rajnikanth is a popular hero in Tamil and Hindi movies who fights for social justice.).

Anwar's credibility was questioned when he did not make public the purported list of 31 to 33 crossover MPs from the BN. Umno leaders went to town on Sept 16 with their spin that they had called Anwar's bluff even as they toned down their usual public image of high-handed behaviour and arrogance.

Apparently, Anwar was on the verge of doing so when reports started filtering in that Umno sympathisers in the Special Branch were harassing BN MPs individually and shadowing their every movement. Rumours sweeping Sarawak recently had it that the MPs were moving about in groups to discourage 'harassment'.

The four avenues forward

Now, the question that arises: does Anwar want to arrest the tendency towards mere theatrics, so far, and make a serious bid for the prime minister's post? If yes, get on with it quickly without further delay and stop issuing time-wasting ultimatums which make great headlines and nothing more, say his admirers and foes alike, who want to see an end to the political uncertainty which has mesmerised the nation since March 8.

What 'realpolitik' options does Anwar have now with the Sword of Damocles hanging over his head? Realistically, there are four avenues forward:

Prevail upon His Majesty, the King, to give Anwar the prime minister's job in his infinite wisdom. The king can do this - after 'interviewing' the defector MPs and reviewing their petition, affidavits, statutory declarations and other legal documentation - by either instructing Abdullah to step down, or in the face of his refusal, sack him for having lost the confidence of the majority in the Dewan Rakyat.

There's always a first time. There are precedents for this in the Commonwealth of Nations;

the King can also summon Parliament into an emergency session where 'there's a clear-cut conflict of interest' as in the present case where the prime minister himself is expected to summon Parliament into session when in fact he (the PM) is the 'guilty party' who will have to run the gauntlet in parliament;

The king can also dissolve Parliament - unless the prime minister himself is willing to advise the king accordingly - and call for fresh elections to end the political impasse. Obviously, any royal decree on this would be testing the limits of the constitutional provisions, parliamentary democracy and the constitutional monarchy; and

The King can refuse to dissolve parliament or call for fresh elections, either on his own, or if so advised by the prime minister, on the grounds that 'we just had an very expensive general election and the public interest would not be served by calling for another one so soon, especially when the opposition alliance has pledged to return to the people within six months to a year of taking office to win a new mandate'.

Of all the options, the consensus is that Umno itself would favour fresh polls rather than hand over the government without another fight to the opposition and flee with its tail between its legs.

Fresh polls would be like, fighting with one's hands and legs tied for Anwar, if the BN caretaker government has him incarcerated in the run-up to the polls. Nevertheless, beggars can't be choosers.

Fresh polling would see the wife, party president Wan Azizah, back in the fray to lead the opposition challenge although she herself is disqualified from standing for another five years by virtue of the fact that she resigned her own seat within months of winning it.

Anwar, not having been convicted by the time of the polls, can contest his Permatang Pauh seat again from behind bars and take it from there.

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