

If truth be told, he can't be PM

Zaid Ibrahim

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The following is the hard-hitting speech by former law minister Zaid Ibrahim at the Royal Rotary Club of Kuala Lumpur today.

comment This is the second time I have been invited to address a Rotary Club. Thank you for the honour. Given the times we live in, perhaps it might be appropriate for me to speak about the leadership transition that has been foisted upon us Malaysians.

I say 'foisted' because neither me nor anyone in this room had any role or say in the choice of the person who will lead Malaysia next. We were mere bystanders in a political chess game. And yet the transition is a subject of great consequence to the nation, one I would say is of great national interest.

Leadership is definitive; the individual who assumes the mantle of leadership of this nation, whomever that may be, is one who for better or worse will leave his mark on us. His will be the hand who guides us to greater success, or possibly gut-wrenching disaster.

Save for the dawn of Merdeka, never in the history of this country has the choice of prime minister been so crucial: Malaysia is in crisis. We are facing tremendous economic challenges with unavoidably harsh socio-political consequences. Our much undermined democracy is once again being assailed by those who would prefer a more autocratic form of governance.

Our public institutions are hollowed out caricatures, unable to distinguish vested party interests from national ones, unable to offer the man in the street refuge from the powerful and connected. Our social fabric that took us from colony to an independent nation and on through the obstacles of nation building has reached a point where it sometimes feel like we are hanging on by a thread. This is the Malaysia we live in.

PM's resignation ill-fated

This is the Malaysia which Abdullah Ahmad Badawi leaves behind. Our prime minister will resign later this month - an ill-fated decision. I say ill-fated not because he has been a great prime minister and we would lose irreplaceable leadership, that is regrettably not the case as all things said and done, Abdullah could have done much more for Malaysia.

Rather, I say that his resignation is ill-fated because his departure will expose the country to forces which may take us down the road of perdition faster than ever. Much has been said of Pak Lah being a weak leader. However, what his critics have not adequately addressed are the consequences of replacing him as prime minister with the anticipated incoming president of Umno, Najib (Abdul) Razak.

It is an undeniable truth that the average Malaysian is anxious about the anticipated transition. Many would prefer it did not happen.

There are two reasons why this is so. The first has to do with the reasoning underlying Umno's demand for the transition itself. The second has to do with Najib personally.

We must recall that after the 2008 general election - a great success for the nation but a fiasco for Umno – one of the chief complaints by the powers-that-be within Umno was that Abdullah's feeble leadership led to the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu* being challenged and ultimately undermined.

His critics also lashed out at him for the latitude given to civil society, a move which they believed weakened a key aspect of Umno's political leverage. It followed in Umno's mind that in order to regain lost ground, it was necessary to reassert its ideology with greater strength.

There was nostalgia for Mahathir's heavy-handed style of leadership and a return to the times when the party cowed many into subservience and submission. The conservatives in Umno yearned for a return to Mahathirism, hoping that it would become a cornerstone of the leadership transition plan. There has been much speculation and punditry on whether a return to the Mahathir era would be good for Malaysia.

Difference between then and now

Let me offer some of my own insight to this debate. The major difference between then and now is this: in most instances, Mahathir was harsh and dictatorial if he believed it was good for the country. But an authoritarian style of government under anyone else would be dictated by the need for self preservation and very little about the country's interest.

The evidence is all around us. After March 8, (2008) when the prime minister ceased being the home minister, the threats of reprisal have escalated and a climate of fear re-cultivated. The detention of Raja Petra Kamarudin, Teresa Kok and Tan Hoong Cheng exemplify this turn for the worse, this appetite to use the sledgehammer.

The shameful power grab in Perak and wanton disregard for public opinion over how BN wrested control of the silver state make many people shudder at the prospect of a return to the dark days. If that was not depressing enough, we have had to bear witness to the police and the newly-minted Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) displaying their allegiance and support to the BN when all we needed and craved for were honest brokers.

It stands to reason that in the mind of the average Malaysian, having suffered a significant loss last March, Umno is on a rampage to regain what it lost by any method available and the man who is expected to lead it to victory is the man who succeeds Abdullah: Najib (Abdul) Razak.

A prime minister must have the confidence of the majority of the *rakyat*. In order for this to be the case, his integrity must be beyond question; not only must he be such a person character, he must be seen to be such a person. The office of prime minister is one of great trust, he who holds that office cradles the nation in his palms.

For this to be the case, there cannot be anything in the mind of the greater public that, correctly or otherwise, associates him with matters of criminality, wrongful action, improper conduct or abuses of power. In short, he must be beyond reproach in his dealings both official and private.

Without intending any accusation, it is regrettable that in the collective mind of the *rakyat*, Najib is not such a person. If a referendum were to be conducted on the subject or if the prime minister was to be elected directly by the *rakyat*, I do not think Najib would succeed. The reason for this is obvious: the *rakyat* has doubts, fuelled by the unanswered allegations against him and his unwillingness to confront these allegations.

It is not a mere trifle in the minds of the *rakyat* that despite a direct challenge from a member of parliament in the august House recently, the deputy prime minister remained silent, not even denying the implicit accusation made against him and demanding that it be repeated outside the chamber in the tried and tested method of refutation employed by parliamentarians throughout the world.

It has not assisted the cause of the incoming prime minister that the MP concerned was suspended for a year on a motion tabled by a fellow minister without the member having been afforded an opportunity to defend his position.

Evidence of SMS text-messages

Consider this. Commissions were paid to an agent for the procurement of submarines through the Defence Ministry, Najib (then) being the defence minister. It is unthinkable that he had no knowledge that the agent was his adviser and aide, Abdul Razak Baginda. The commission paid out was exceedingly large, in excess of RM400 million.

The defence minister was dutybound to direct enquiries to see if there had been any impropriety in the way the contracts were awarded when news of the commission surfaced; after all the price of the submarines would be considerably lower without the need for such commissions.

Taxpayers, you and I, have paid for those submarines at a price that in all probability factored in the commission. Taxpayers are yet to be told of an inquiry let alone the result of such an inquiry. Consider the Altantuya Shaariibuu affair. A young woman was brutally murdered, her corpse destroyed by explosives.

These explosives are not the usual type of explosives, yet no inquiry was held to determine how they were available to these killers. Those accused of her murder are police officers serving in the Unit Tindakan Khas, a highly specialised unit who amongst other things serve as bodyguards to the prime minister and the deputy prime minister.

Amidst evidence that the accused were employed to protect the PM and the DPM, they were directed to (Abdul) Razak Baginda through the aide of the deputy prime minister. Amongst other things, we have heard of the senior investigating officer admitting that the deputy prime minister

was an important witness and yet no statement was taken.

It is not unreasonable to think that this is irregular, more so when evidence of SMS text-messages from the deputy prime minister concerning material matters have surfaced. The text-messages cannot be ignored, proverbially swept under the carpet.

Even if they do not establish - or are not capable of establishing - any culpability on the part of Najib, these issues must be addressed.

The air must be cleared, it is thick with accusations and doubts which can only undermine the office of the prime minister if he were to assume it. The deputy prime minister's cause has not been aided by the fact that charges were preferred against (Abdul) Razak Baginda only after public outcry, the manner in which the prosecution was conducted and the decision of the High Court acquitting (Abdul) Razak Baginda not having been appealed.

Power grab an unmitigated disaster

The Perak affair was an unmitigated disaster for the nation. It is no secret that Najib led the charge there and is still overseeing matters.

In the minds of Malaysians, Perak is synonymous with the deputy prime minister. They now equate him with the high-handed tactics that were employed to seize power, tactics that included the disappearances of the three crucial assemblypersons and the blockading of the legislative assembly by the police.

In doing so, they equate the DPM with the hijacking of democracy, the only persons saying otherwise being those persons who have associations with Umno. In their minds, no responsible leader would allow for the undermining of the institutions of state and the constitution of this nation.

They ask, rightly so, whether this is the kind of leadership that Malaysians can expect from Najib when he becomes the prime minister.

With all of this, and more, how are we not to feel anxious? How are we to sleep peacefully at night? I know that I cannot. The situation is desperate and the air is pregnant with tension. We need the state of affairs to be resolved in a way that is in the best interests of the nation and the *rakyat*.

To an extent, this is a matter for the Barisan Nasional. I urge its members to put politics aside and think things through. We all want a better future, a safer and more prosperous life for our children, all of them, a Malaysia where our children can reach for the stars with the certainty that there is nothing to stop them from being the Malaysians they want to be.

Let the king be kingmaker

I do not believe that the Barisan Nasional will do what is necessary. Politics has a tendency of making those who embrace it cynical. The answer lies elsewhere, with His Majesty the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

In this case, His Majesty plays the role of 'kingmaker'. The discretion to appoint the prime minister who succeeds Abdullah lies with His Majesty. Though His Majesty is required under the constitution to appoint the person who commands the confidence of the majority of the members of parliament, it is a matter for His Majesty's judgment. Never before has such a heavy burden being laid on His Majesty to make a brave and correct choice.

For King and country, I urge His Majesty to take into consideration the prerequisites to appointment and the concerns of the *rakyat*. There is no constitutional obligation on His Majesty to appoint the president of Umno as the prime minister. There are still well qualified members of parliament from Umno who can be appointed PM to bring us back from the brink.

Malaysia needs someone who the *rakyat* can throw their weight behind without reservation. Someone they can trust and respect. Someone who has no scandal to distract him and thereby gain respect from the international community.

These are difficult times and be prepared for worst times to visit us. Malaysia needs a leader who will unite the country in the face of the adversity. Divided, we are weak. I am loath to say it, but for the reasons I have set out am compelled to say that Najib will most certainly divide us and in doing so, will nudge us closer to the edge.

Some of you may say that all efforts to promote the national interest are at this stage an exercise in futility. If truth be told, I am tempted to slip into cynical hopelessness too. I am fighting the temptation to give up for one simple reason: Malaysia and all that it represents. This is a blessed country, a country too valuable for us to turn our backs on.

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