

'PM Najib': International media's underwhelming reception
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From London and Paris to Jakarta and Brisbane, notable publications have cast doubts on the Najib Abdul Razak's worthiness for the PM's office.

It is safe to say that no prime ministerial succession – we have had five in the last 38 years – has had as underwhelming a reception in the international media as Najib's.

second stimulus package 260209 najibNajib, who would be Malaysia's sixth prime minister, is expected to be sworn in next week, a little more than a week after Umno - dominant member of the ruling BN coalition - endorses him as its 7th president in the party's 63-year history.

Traditionally, the Umno president assumes the post of prime minister.

It is only to be expected that the international media would accord features and comment on the impending investiture of a new prime minister of Malaysia.

If memory serves, only Dr Mahathir Mohamed's acclamation as Umno president in June 1981 and consequent elevation to the office of PM incurred a negative vibe - the international media noted he was the author of the callous "We will shoot them" remark in connection with the mass landing of Vietnamese refugees off the Terengganu coast in the mid-1970s.

Even comments by international correspondents on another downside of Mahathir - that he was once viewed as a Malay ultra - did not negatively affect the international media's reception to him in mid-1981.

It could be said that the general reaction to him was considerable expectation weighted with some trepidation.

The international media's reaction to the appointments of second prime minister Abdul Razak's, third PM Hussein Onn's - Mahathir was fourth - and fifth PM Abdullah Badawi's, were unremarkable.

James Bond school of journalism

Not so with Najib - the international media's reaction, thus far, has been wholly negative.

Now there is something to be said for what one could term as the 'S Rajaratnam Journalistic Stricture'.

This refers to the school of reporting practiced by international correspondents (he variously referred to it as the 'James Bond' school) who, he said, would descend on a country and proceed to suggest omniscience on the basis of conversations with taxi drivers on the ride in from the airport and with the barman at the hotel.

Rajaratnam, the late deputy prime minister and foreign minister of Singapore, was inveighing against the journalistic school whose practitioners' superficial contact with the people and country results in articles that are neither instructive nor illustrative.

altantuya murder case publish on french newspaper la liberation 050309Hardly any of the articles that have appeared in recent weeks in publications as varied as The Liberation in France and the Far Eastern Economic Review on Najib's impending swearing-in as PM were by itinerant correspondents.

In the main, the reportage was by seasoned Asian hands who have logged many miles and destinations

in Southeast Asia. (In other words, they don't belong to the James Bond School of international correspondents.)

Najib's entitlement to the top job

The distilled essence of their articles: the 54-year-old Najib's arrival at the top political office in Malaysia is gifted by a sense of entitlement more potent than explicable by his impressive pedigree and long preparation.

Otherwise, the questions that could reasonably be asked of him in connection with the murder of the Mongolian beauty Altantuya Shaaribuu in October 2006 are too searing to leave him unscathed and therefore untrammelled in his progress to the top of the greasy pole.

Just now there's a peculiar asymmetry between the claim of Mahathir, Najib's chief promoter for the office of PM, that the Malays are presently under threat and the sense of entitlement that propels Najib to that office.

Perhaps Mahathir thinks the Malay special rights are not a privilege but an entitlement, just as all of Umno, barring Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, think that the position of Umno president and PM is not a privilege to be earned by Najib as something he is entitled to.

This is from the standpoint that there is distinction between a privilege and an entitlement: one suggests that it must be earned, the other is yours regardless of the incidentals, even if it be the loss of a human life.

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