

The real power behind the throne
Malaysianmirror.com
02 November 2010

COMMENT Malaysian Prime minister Najib Abdul Razak's illness with chicken pox on the eve of the visit of two foreign dignitaries – Australian Prime minister Julia Gillard and US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, is unfortunate but not as awkward as how events have unfolded whilst he is recuperating.

Najib first showed symptoms of illness at the 17th Asean Summit Meeting in Hanoi and according to his wife, Rosmah Mansor, has been asked to rest by his doctors.

Whilst at the Kuala Lumpur Hospital, where she paid a visit to the accident victims of the Genting bus crash, Rosmah was reported to be in 'high spirits standing in for Najib at functions'.

Rosmah appears to be taking her role a bit too seriously.

Is she not overstretching her responsibilities when she says she will stand in for the PM by 'officiating on Najib's behalf' at the '1Malaysia Deepavali Carnival' at Little India in Brickfields a few days ago?

Yesterday, she repeated this prime-ministerial role at Sri Perdana for Julia Gillard.

Malaysians are confused for they would tend to believe that when the Prime minister is incapacitated or on holiday, it is his deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin who takes over.

People will start to make comparisons and say, when Barack Obama is ill, Michelle does not stand in for him. When Julia Gillard is ill, her partner Tim Mathieson does not take over. When the British monarch falls sick, Prince Philip her consort, does not take over, but Prince Charles, the heir apparent to the throne, assumes her role.

There is speculation that Najib is not really ill but wants to avoid the two dignitaries, who are probably the two most powerful women in the world.

Does Najib not want to be pressured into concessions with both Clinton and Gillard? Or is his 'sickie' just him 'playing hard to get'?

Clinton will meet civil society groups and also leaders of the opposition. Is Najib 'upset' and so snubs her because of this?

One of the major topics to be discussed by Gillard is about human-trafficking. Recently, seven Malaysian immigration officials were arrested for the part they played in people-smuggling.

Australia is the final destination for asylum seekers, principally from war-torn Afghanistan who fly into Malaysia before taking a boat to Indonesia and thence, to Timor Leste and Australia.

This year alone, over 5,500 refugees have ended up in Australia.

Is Najib reluctant to support Australia in setting up a processing centre for asylum seekers

in Timor Leste, because he does not want to risk upsetting his counterparts in Timor Leste and Indonesia? Is he afraid to say 'no'?

Is he also fearful of telling Gillard that human-trafficking is a rampant problem and that with high levels of corruption in the country, which his government appears not to deal with effectively, it is therefore impossible for him to tackle the issue?

Did he send his wife out to 'soften' both these women so that they would accept his views? He realises that Clinton and Gillard are both professionals in what they do but if Rosmah engaged them in small talk, he effectively employs delaying tactics to important issues present on their busy schedules, which only a decision from the Malaysian Prime minister would suffice.

Whatever the true reasons, Rosmah should never have assumed the PM's role in public. It is highly unprecedented.

The image projected worldwide must be one of confusion. Does protocol not mean anything in Malaysia? Even if Rosmah was not in any formal discussion but was merely present in an 'entertainment' capacity like in a banquet or similar, it is awkward for the main players involved.

The mixed messages to the public, when Rosmah takes centre stage standing in for PM are confusing and damaging.

For the visiting dignitaries, they are not accorded the due respect which should be reserved for people of their seniority and importance.

Gillard and Clinton are important world players. Has Najib an ulterior motive for staying away and is using the chicken pox as a convenient excuse?

For Muhyiddin, people will wonder why he is perceived to be of lesser importance and not worthy of his deputy premiership. Has Rosmah usurped him?

For Rosmah, the people will think that she has delusions of grandeur. They will ask why she is 'standing in' when she is not even an elected person. She is only the PM's wife.

They may well say she is not even the wife of an elected PM; nor is she a civil servant.

They might even suggest that if she fancies herself as PM that she should offer her candidacy at the next General Election.

Maybe these conjectures are all wrong and that she is truly the power behind the throne.

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