



Bizarre Opposition Stunt in Batu Talam

The Opposition's boycott of the Batu Talam by-election in Pahang can only be described as irresponsible and hypocritical, especially when it comes at a time when the ruling coalition's support is said to be waning and the people have a right to a choice.

IN A BIZARRE ACT THAT SMACKS OF COWARDICE AND IRRESPONSIBILITY, PAS and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) have decided to boycott the Batu Talam by-election in Pahang.

Blaming their decision on the alleged impartiality of the Election Commission (EC) and the 'hypocrisy' of its chairman, Tan Sri Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman, the two parties said they hope to send a strong signal to voters that reforms of the election laws and regulations are a must.

According to PAS Deputy President Nasharuddin Mat Isa, the decision was made even before Abdul Rashid called for reforms on Jan 8.

'We are used to this. It seems to be a trend for the (EC) Chairman to call for change a week before any election,' Nasharuddin told a press conference at the PAS headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

The Opposition's boycott of the Jan 28 poll is bizarre because in the past, it has been vehemently attacking the Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi-led government on many issues, and the consensus is that it stands a good chance of reducing the Barisan Nasional (BN)'s majority.

Although PKR was the first to announce its boycott of the by-election, the decision by PAS to pursue a similar action was still surprising. Batu Talam has traditionally been contested by PAS.

This has led to speculation that while the protest against the EC may be valid, the boycott decision might have also been influenced by the inability of the two Malay-dominated parties to come to terms on the by-election.

The expectation is that the Opposition will do better this time around, given the many complaints against the BN government. Even the admission by the EC Chairman that the election laws needed to be revamped could have been used to entice the voters to side with the Opposition.

PAS and PKR may still not be able to force the government to agree to review the election laws by boycotting the by-election. Instead, they may end up giving a walkover victory to the BN and, most irresponsibly, depriving the Batu Talam voters of a credible choice.

The two Opposition parties may on the sly put up an independent candidate to take on the BN. But their decision is also seen as reflecting the fear that they may not either, despite the hype that the BN is losing support since the 2004 general election.

In the 2004 general election, the late Datuk Tengku Paris Tengku Razlan won by a 2,761-vote majority, beating PAS candidate Dr Mohamed Nilam Abdul Manap, who obtained 2,653 votes.

Judging by that outcome, the task of unseating the ruling party will be difficult. But the Opposition, in particular PAS, stands a good chance of trimming the BN's majority.

The situation has changed considerably since the 2004 general election when the *Gemilang Cemerlang Terbilang* slogan of the BN caught the imagination of the voters and Prime Minister Abdullah's *imam* role bowled over the conservative Malay voters.

Since then, however, many things have happened, causing the slogan to turn into a butt of jokes and prompting the people to have second thoughts about the BN government. Still, it would be difficult to beat the BN at a by-election as the case of last year's Pengkalan Pasir poll in Kelantan showed.

The BN and the government will pour all its resources – human and financial – to beat the Opposition despite the PM saying that the BN was not using the by-election to test the acceptance of its policies and actions.

The by-election should have given the Opposition the opportunity to highlight the various policies and actions of the Abdullah government that are affecting the well-being of the people, like the fuel subsidy withdrawal, electricity tariff and toll hikes and the general increase in the cost of living.

Pahang as a whole is not alien to Opposition victory. PAS, the DAP and the now-defunct Semangat 46 had all won seats in the state. In the 1999 general election, the Opposition won eight seats but was reduced to one in the last poll.

There's no harm in PAS and PKR disputing the transparency, secrecy and fairness of the electoral system. But to deprive the Batu Talam voters of a choice cannot be considered a wise move.

It's hypocritical for the Opposition, in particular PAS, to boycott the by-election because in the past, the same 'unfair' system had given them victories, which they gladly accepted.

Is PAS saying that it will also boycott the coming general election if the election laws and regulations are not amended?

Or has PAS inadvertently fallen into the BN's trap by allowing itself to be influenced by PKR? Sadly, for the 10,525 Batu Talam voters, they are not only being deprived of a choice but may end up

not enjoying as many 'goodies' as they would have had there been a contest.

Intellectuals Unite!

BY now, most Malaysians and whoever is interested in this country, must be more than familiar with the Prime Minister's penchant for slogans and clichés.

The latest to be introduced by the Prime Minister and wholeheartedly echoed by the mainstream media is his desire to make Malaysia an *ulul al-bab* society.

To those Malaysians who are fans of the late Tan Sri P Ramlee, the term would be vaguely familiar. But that was Ahmad Al-Bab, the main character in his movie of the same name. This is a different *al-bab*. It refers to the Prime Minister's desire to create a Malaysian society filled with scholars and thinkers. *Ulul al-bab* refers to people who observe, study and understand God's creation and pass on the knowledge to the masses. In Arabic, it roughly means 'the openers of doors to knowledge'.

The Star in its Jan 9 issue quoted the Prime Minister as saying that Malaysia should create an *ulul al-bab* community of between 5,000 and 10,000 scholars and thinkers in science and technology by 2020 to ensure the nation's success. 'These are the groups who will be playing a major role towards the development of the people and the nation as well as contributing to mankind,' said Abdullah. He said the creation of such a community should be part of the country's social development plan. 'This should be our aspiration,' he said when launching the *Scientific Excellence in Islamic Civilisation: Islamic Science Ahead of its Time* exhibition at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre on Jan 8.

In defining *ulul al-bab*, he said it was a community of scholars and thinkers who could analyse natural occurrences and use natural greatness for development purposes. He said Muslims were still weak in the performance of *fardhu kifayah* — social obligation as advocated by the religion.

It's a noble call, but surely, creating 10,000 or more scholars and thinkers will not make a huge difference to society if the government is reluctant to give them the chance and the tools to freely express their scholastic prowess.

In all fairness, the government must ask itself to what extent it has been using the thinking power of the *ulul al-bab*. Granted that many of them have been appointed to government commissions, councils and committees, their contributions seldom go beyond the voluminous reports and working papers.

Let me not be petty but it is a well-known fact that many Muslim scholars and thinkers are members of the various *Islam Hadhari*-related think tanks, councils and committees. But judging by the understanding of *Islam Hadhari* or the lack of it, one wonders what role these scholars and thinkers are playing, or to what degree their ideas have been accepted and implemented by those driving the agenda.

At the end of the day, it all boils down to political gains and bureaucratic expediency. Despite such mantras as transparency, accountability and openness, the ruling elite continues to fear and alienate scholars and thinkers who do not share their narrow partisan views.

It's okay for the Prime Minister to lament the fact that none of

the Muslim countries is classified as developed. But we should first look closer to home. Where do we stand in global economic ranking today?

For many years, Malaysia was classified as one of the top-20 most open economies in the world, making it the only Muslim country in that league. Are we still on the list?

If Muslims today are regarded as troublemakers, terrorists, unproductive, weak, easily misled and oppressed, as the Prime Minister put it in his speech, one of the reasons has to be the lack of appreciation for scholarship and freedom of thought among Muslim rulers.

So, Muslim rulers should not be too hasty to blame others for their predicament and to suspect conspiracy in every misfortune that befalls them.

Muslims and their rulers must practise what they preach. They have to start to be more tolerant towards the freedom of scholarship and thought.

The AirAsia Thorn in MAS' Side

FLY Asian Express (FAX) started life rather hastily in the second half of last year as the provider of rural air services to Sabah and Sarawak.

Hastily because the air-dependent eastern Malaysian states were threatened with crippling disruption of air services when the national carrier, Malaysia Airlines (MAS), decided, in anger some say, to abandon the service.

The unexpected development came about in the midst of the chaotic transfer of the bulk of domestic routes from MAS to high-flying budget carrier AirAsia Bhd.

FAX, which according to its official website, is a 'flexi airline', provides some of the traditional airline services at affordable fares by adopting innovative fare structures.

FAX now flies to over 20 routes across Sabah and Sarawak using a fleet of seven 50-seater Fokker 50s and five 19-seater Twin Otter aircraft. These aircraft were once part of MAS' rural fleet.

Modestly, FAX's website declares: 'For the moment, all FAX flights are domestic Malaysian destinations only. However, it will extend services to international destinations in the future.'

That was half a year ago, but today, FAX looks set to become international and, in the process, pose a further challenge to MAS, which is struggling to keep its Kelantanese kite flying.

On Jan 4, AirAsia announced that FAX had been given rights to operate long-haul flights to destinations in Asia, Australia and Europe.

FAX is owned by the same people who helm AirAsia — Datuk Tony Fernandes, Datuk Kamarudin Meranun and Raja Mohd Azmi Raja Razali. Fernandes, who is also AirAsia chief executive officer, has a 10% stake; Kamarudin 50%; and Raja Azmi, the former AirAsia chief financial officer, 20%.

According to *The Star* newspaper report, the airline will operate its long-haul services using the brand AirAsia X under a franchise agreement with AirAsia. It plans to start its international operations in July.

AirAsia X will offer two low-fare classes, namely, super economy and economy. On-board flight entertainment and food will be available for purchase. Carrying on the tradition of AirAsia, the fares to London will start as low as RM9.99, excluding tax and surcharges.

But the real challenge to MAS and other airlines in the region is if

there is a collaboration between AirAsia and Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group and Sir Stelios Haji-Ionnou's EasyGroup. AirAsia has denied any such speculation.

Still, Fernandes and his team should be congratulated for their foresight, and, above all, their courage in going global at a time when the airline industry worldwide is going through one of the most difficult times in civil aviation history due to high oil prices and terrorism threats.

While this development will almost certainly pose another major challenge to MAS, it should be good for the country. Coming as it did during Visit Malaysia Year (VMY) 2007, the globalisation of AirAsia could help bring more tourists to the country.

It will also help Malaysians who are travelling abroad for business, education and leisure, especially at a time when they are facing rising prices of goods and services at home. Cheap international airfares are a welcome respite.

Already, many Malaysian travellers are moving away from MAS in favour of other cheaper airlines which operate into the KL International Airport for their long-distance travels. For the price of a stopover, say, in Singapore, Dubai, Abu Dhabi or Doha, travellers can now enjoy much cheaper fares than the lowest that MAS can offer.

This is a welcome development since MAS, as part-and-parcel of its government-mandated restructuring to make it profitable, has, in recent years, been cutting back on its international operations and raising ticket prices.

Judging from media reports, MAS would have cancelled more international destinations and cut frequencies had it not been for the plea by the government — which, incidentally, is its controlling shareholder — not to do so during VMY.

So, one can say with a measure of certainty that while the internationalisation of the AirAsia/FAX service is good for the country, it may cause further headaches to MAS.

Maybe, we no longer need to support a national airline. Taxpayers' money would be better spent on everyday needs of the people like subsidising toll and fuel prices. As it now stands, taxpayers are the real losers for every sen MAS loses. **mb**

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