

NEW STRAITS TIMES

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A study in creative dissonance

CONTRASTING articles by Datuk Seri Najib Razak and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim appeared on the same page yesterday, in the opinion section of *The Wall Street Journal Asia*.

They both centred on the controversial "Allah" issue, but that was where the similarity ended. In approach, tenor and presumably intention, their articles went in practically opposite directions from the start — the prime minister taking a conciliatory, disarming style, as against the opposition leader's fault-finding digressions.

The contrast was apparent from their first lines, which told the whole story.

Najib: "In contrast to the impression left by some international reporting, in the hours and days after the recent vandalism of churches and other places of worship in Malaysia, the true spirit of our nation shone through."

Anwar: "Malaysia has once again resurfaced in international headlines for the wrong reasons."

The significance of the articles ap-

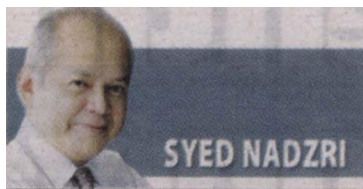
pearing in the same newspaper is enormous: *The Wall Street Journal Asia* is seen as a leader in global business news for Asia and read by "an influential pan-Asian audience of corporate and government decision-makers".

Its reach and impact, is huge. Every word counts.

That's where Najib's earnestness, in wanting to see through the whole "Allah" episode with minimal damage to the social fabric and delicate make-up of Malaysia comes out strongly.

"Across religions and races, Malaysians have spoken with a unified voice in condemning the despicable acts of a few," Najib wrote, "and citizens have joined as one to assert that vandalism was never an acceptable way to express diverse views or resolve differences.

"Muslim groups volunteered to safeguard churches in their towns. Muslim social activists have written petitions to oppose these senseless acts of vandalism. Muslim civic groups are standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Christians, Hindus and



Buddhists to ensure that all people can freely worship as they wish."

Christian and civic leaders had called for calm and interfaith dialogue, he added, as they were fully aware that those who perpetrated these acts did not represent the Muslim majority in Malaysia.

A rah-rah piece, yes, but what else could anyone expect? He is the prime minister, after all. But this prime minister has good reason and is on solid ground to say so.

Najib is plainly putting things in proper perspective, particularly for those in influential positions in the region, like WSJ readers, to right the false impressions that might have arisen since the Dec 31 High Court ruling permitting the use of the word "Allah" to refer to God in the *Herald*,

a Catholic weekly newspaper.

"The government will reach out to all parts of Malaysian society in the coming days to foster open dialogue and work to resolve sensitive issues," Najib wrote.

He also said the country must resolve to maintain a fair and open society with opportunities for all Malaysians to flourish.

"Reforms have been undertaken, such as liberalising ownership requirements in key sectors of the economy, encouraging foreign direct investments, creating 1Malaysia clinics to provide access to healthcare and extending educational opportunities to all Malaysians," he wrote.

"These reforms have sometimes been politically difficult. But they are important because the long-term health of Malaysia's society and economy can only be built on what unites us rather than what divides us. We will not waver from the pursuit of 1Malaysia."

Soothing.

But not necessarily so with the tone of Anwar's piece: "the recent arson

attacks exemplify what's wrong with the way Malaysia regards its non-Muslim citizens," he wrote.

"Since (the Dec 31 High Court ruling), an already tense situation boiled over, largely due to incitement by a few reckless politicians, the mainstream media and a handful of non-governmental organisations linked by membership and leadership to the Umno."

Anwar does what he always does best—what he thrives on, other than rabble-rousing — throwing his conspiracy theories into the issue, claiming that the government is using scare tactics and incendiary propaganda techniques to exploit public sentiment and garner support through useful diversions from embarrassing scandals.

He describes this as "old politics". But perhaps this is the "old Anwar" we know so well: the one who always paints a picture of a disconsolate Malaysia and then pushes himself forward as the saviour.

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