

Najib's storm in a Chinese teacup

China has become the new battlefield between two of our former PMs

Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

THE rumbles started almost from the moment news broke that former premier Datuk Seri Najib Razak would be opening the World Chinese Economic Forum.

As far as the chattering class was concerned, there were too many things wrong with that.

Najib, they said, had been convicted of graft, never mind that he is appealing the decision.

An outraged DAP leader wondered why the “most glamorous financial convict in the world” was invited to the event.

Moreover, Najib’s government fell largely because of the Chinese tsunami. Should he, as such, be speaking at a Chinese conference?

These are valid questions. But the Chinese tsunami has receded and, just for the sake of argument, isn’t Pakatan Harapan’s prime minister candidate also a convicted person?

The pot is all too fond of calling the kettle black.

Anyway, the rumbling did not end with the event, which was held on Dec 27.

Property tycoon Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew, whose name is synonymous with the Palace of the Golden Horses Hotel, kicked up a fuss, calling it a “huge embarrassment”.

Lee is the man who envisioned the original World Chinese Econo-

mic Forum (WCEF) back in 2009 before rebranding it as the World Chinese Economic Summit in 2010.

Then, following an internal dispute among the organisers and sponsors, it became the Global Chinese Economic and Technology Summit (GCETS).

Lee had nothing to do with the event Najib opened. As such, he was justifiably indignant that another organisation had “hijacked” the original event name and caused his friends to think he had invited Najib.

Moreover, GCETS, of which Lee is patron, held its annual summit at a beach hotel in Penang a week earlier.

It was far grander, with bigshot guests as well as a video message from the Prime Minister, but it appears to have been totally eclipsed by the Najib event.

Kleptocrat, convicted criminal or whatever one might call him, Najib sensed the time had come to reach out to the Chinese.

“Najib wants to rehabilitate and detox his image. He is trying to frame his makeover based on his economic record as PM,” said political commentator Ivanpal S. Grewal.

Najib used the WCEF platform to remind the Chinese that he had created the environment for them to invest and do business, he defended the policies that made it

easier for China-Malaysia business synergies and rebutted claims that he was selling Malaysia to China when he was prime minister.

He is a friend of China whereas China-Malaysia ties were at its worst during the second premiership of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and have yet to recover.

“He also launched a full frontal attack on Dr Mahathir.

“In doing so, he was telling his audience that he is not trapped in the way that Dr Mahathir sees China and the world, where Malays are always portrayed as victims,” said Ivanpal.

Going for Dr Mahathir that way was rather below the belt but the elder man had done worse to Najib.

The subtext to the critique is that the Chinese business community can now compare what he and Dr Mahathir did for them.

“If you speak to Chinese business people today, many of them will admit Najib was the most Chinese-friendly PM,” said an adviser to a Chinese school association.

Najib then took to Facebook to poke at his critic Lee, highlighting the tycoon’s cosy ties with Dr Mahathir with documents showing that the pair are business partners.

Lee, a high-flyer in the 1990s, makes no secret of his devotion to Dr Mahathir.

His daughter, together with Dr

Mahathir’s eldest granddaughter, were responsible for that painfully hagiographic documentary film, *M for Malaysia*.

Being a friend of the former premier surely helped and Lee was a high-flyer in the 1990s. He runs the private jet outfit Flyjet Sdn Bhd and was the first person in the country to own a private Boeing 737.

Beneath his aggressive business style, he is well-versed in Chinese literature and is good at Chinese calligraphy

He founded the global Chinese platform with the aim of connecting the Chinese diaspora although the industry gossip is that the string of awards for lifetime achievement, entrepreneur of the year and so on that are presented at these conferences come with a price.

Lee referred to his brainchild as “*zhong xi xiang xue xi*” - East and West learning from each other.

“He is a remarkable man. He was a powerful political interlocutor at one point in time, but he faced tax problems when Najib was the PM and he took it badly,” said Ivanpal.

The event that Najib spoke at was organised by the International Strategy Institute, a rival organisation whose chairman is Cheah Chyuan Yong.

Cheah is a businessman from Bukit Mertajam where he goes by

the nickname “*fei chai*”, which means “fat boy” in Cantonese.

He has a rather colourful history if what is written about him on the Internet is to be believed.

The flurry of opinions over two rival groups representing the Chinese economic agenda is a sign of the times.

“We are at a political crossroads. The Chinese sectoral warlords are staking the landscape to woo Beijing. There’s rivalry to provide the platform for China investments in the near future,” said DAP politician and newspaper columnist Jeff Ooi.

The business sector has been badly battered. There has not been a day of political stability since 2018. Then came the pandemic and now there are the floods.

The Chinese business community has been sending out mixed signals for quite a while.

The next general election is not going to be determined by Malaysia Development Bhd or corruption issues.

“Rice-bowl issues are at the forefront while Chinese businessmen are looking at who can best provide political stability and recover the economy,” said the above adviser to the Chinese school association.

The views expressed here are the writer’s own.