

A downward spiral for Najib

It has been one setback after another for the former prime minister, with one side clamouring for him to be punished while his supporters claim he is a victim of selective prosecution.

THERE was a big crowd calling out “Hidup Najib” (Long live Najib) as Datuk Seri Najib Razak’s vehicle was being driven up to the courthouse on Wednesday.

It was a day that began with high hopes, but that quickly collapsed into disappointment for supporters of the former prime minister when the High Court ruled that he would have to face trial on the charges of money, laundering and abuse of power in the 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) case.

Already convicted for the SRC International case, this means that Najib will be trooping in and out of court for several more years.

“I don’t know why people actually thought that the court would rule otherwise. There have been so many legal setbacks for him,” said a Najib loyalist who has closely followed the proceedings with great disappointment.

Much of the misplaced hope had to do with Najib’s apology for what had happened under his watch.

Reaction to the apology reflected the deeply divided mood out there about Najib and the 1MDB scandal.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was caught in the crossfire for accepting the apology. The pro-Najib crowd took it as a gentlemanly response that was



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becoming of a Muslim, but the anti-Najib side saw it as a betrayal.

Anwar was basically acknowledging the apology. It was akin to saying “noted” and he was in no way absolving Najib of what he had done. Moreover, Anwar probably understands what Najib is going through.

The government’s intention to introduce a law to allow house arrest has also riled the Pakatan Harapan base, prompting Pasir Gudang MP Hassan Abdul Karim to come up with a pensive yet cynical poem about how his quest against wrongdoings has come to naught.

It was a contrast to another critical reaction from DAP’s Tony Pua, who slammed Najib’s apology with a scathing reminder of how the former premier had sacked top officials in a bid to cover up the scandal.

“I’m not sure about the purpose of the apology, but the law is the law and Tony was stating

the facts,” said Dr Abdul Aziz Bari, the DAP assemblyman for Tebing Tinggi.

It took former minister Khairy Jamaluddin to point out that DAP leaders lacked the “cultural quotient” needed to function effectively in diverse cultural settings.

“The cultural divide is so wide. It explains why DAP is unable to find acceptance among the Malays and yet, they keep asking: why is it that the Malays don’t like us,” said political risk consultant Datuk Wan Shihab Wan Ismail.

An article by *The Star* columnist Ivanpal S. Grewal was widely noted for his honest, balanced and erudite account of Najib’s efforts to make the country a competitive hub, his foreign policies and his prioritisation of infrastructure projects. But all this was eventually marred by a scandal of international scale.

A pertinent point by Ivanpal, a lawyer, was how the Najib dilemma is forcing Malaysia to examine questions about justice, accountability and reconciliation.

Politics between the opposing sides, which unfortunately are also defined by race, will remain divided for as long as one side perceives him to be the victim while the other condemns him as a villain.

“Umno will likely to go into the next general election as a coalition. For this to work, the wound

has to be healed, the ghost of 1MDB has to be exorcised. Only then can Umno turn the page,” said Wan Shihab.

DAP has been under pressure for not showing more teeth despite holding the most seats in the government and its Chinese base has been unforgiving about the man known as Bossku.

Umno leaders are equally under pressure from their own base.

The majority of Umno members are mostly influenced by the headlines. They are not tuned in to the nitty-gritty of the court proceedings and they believe that Najib is a victim of selective prosecution.

Many of them feel that the party was stronger and their lives were better under Najib and they think the party leadership is not doing enough for Najib.

Or as former minister Datuk Zaid Ibrahim put it: Umno is only pretending to care for Najib.

The more informed in Umno ask why the perpetrators of the wrongdoings, who include personalities in Bank Negara as well as those who had managed the affairs in 1MDB, are not charged.

Perhaps the most pressing question of all is why there isn’t greater effort to hunt down the mastermind Jho Low.

Lawyer and Umno politician Ainul Aizat Ahmad Ishak said Umno-related WhatsApp groups

were on fire following the High Court decision.

“Many questioned the decision and there was a flood of sympathy and prayers for Najib’s well-being,” he said.

Some posted the video of Law Minister Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said’s speech at an Umno gathering slamming the previous government for not doing more for Najib. It was their way of saying that Umno leaders have exploited the Najib issue.

“The emotions and fervour are not what it used to be and many in the party now realise that Najib will have to go through the court process.

“But you will not find a single person in Umno saying that we must move on from Najib. There is immense sympathy and we are with him,” said Ainul Aizat.

It is a long and challenging road and Umno will not be able to turn the page for as long as its members perceive Najib to be a victim.

On the other hand, closure for the Pakatan base means that Najib must pay for the crime and serve his conviction without any more concessions.

Given the vast difference in public opinion, it looks like closure on the Najib dilemma is a pipe dream.

The views expressed here are entirely the writer’s own.