

A silent Prime Minister confounds the nation
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NEWS ANALYSIS - Eventually it will happen. Not today, not next week, not even next month. But there will come a time when Malaysians will ask this question: for how long more is Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak going to stay silent during roiling debates on the most important issues facing the country?

And then there will come a time when Malaysians will just stop expecting any intervention from the man who occupies Putrajaya; when the mandate he won on May 5 will not matter and Barisan Nasional's intellectual heft or the last word on government policy will be what the likes of Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim and Datuk Seri Dr S. Subramaniam throw at us daily.

Sad but true, isn't it?

This is what we know about Malaysia since Election 2013:

- * The country's household debt is dangerously high, and those in Malaysia's lower income bracket are suffocating under a mountain of debt.
- * The slowing economy of China presents major challenges for all trading nations, even Malaysia which is dependent on China as a market for oil palm, among other goods.
- * Despite all the talk about moving Malaysia up the income chain, the government's minimum wage policy is mired in confusion – some companies are still exempt.
- * The government's retirement policy, now at 60 years of age to retain talent, is also now seeing exceptions.
- * All is not well on the race relations front. The bill which would have allowed the consent of one parent for the conversion of a child to Islam has been withdrawn but raw feelings about the manner in which it was introduced and then withdrawn remain. Non-Muslims are upset that the Cabinet tried to ram through the law without consultation while Muslims see the flip-flopping as a sign of a government in retreat.
- * There does not appear to be collective responsibility in the Cabinet. Last year, Najib said the Sedition Act will be replaced by the National Harmony Act but Home Minister Zahid Hamidi believes he is not bound by the decision of the Cabinet.

Simply put, the country has been adrift for awhile. But the PM has chosen the option of silence, which, for a leader, is no option at all. The more controversial the issue, the less likelihood of anyone seeing Najib's footprint in the debate.

His aides and supporters say that he believes in moderation and that behind closed doors he is full of ideas on helping all Malaysians. Really? How about making public those points? What does he think of the conversion bill? Has he read the riot act to Zahid for breaking ranks with him on the Sedition Act? Has he had a re-think about abolishing certain laws, given the pushback from Umno?

Najib was briefed by Datuk Seri Idris Jala's brains trust recently on the education system and the need for English to become a big part of teaching here. What are the Prime Minister's thoughts on this proposal?

Pre-election Najib was advised that staying clear of hot button issues was smart politics and would guarantee self-preservation. Post-election Najib should realise that that policy landed him in no-man's land. He won, but without a strong enough mandate.

Staying silent and letting Zahid Hamidi, Wan Junaidi and their ilk set the national agenda is just setting up Najib for a big fall. Maybe not next week, or next month but eventually. – July 12, 2013.

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