

Why Najib hightails it to New York and such...
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Here is one reason why Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak enjoys being outside the country so much: it is only in the rarefied air of the United Nations assembly or in meeting rooms at the swanky Waldorf Astoria in New York that an audience still buys his talk about Malaysia being a model of moderate Islam.

Back home, here in Malaysia, with the right wing very much in ascendancy in Umno and with religious and racial intolerance at red flag levels, any mention of the word "moderation" is met with cynicism. Or worse yet, disdain.

It was revealed in Parliament that the Prime Minister spent a staggering RM44 million on travel abroad between March 2008 and May 2013.

It is a fact that has raised eyebrows even among Umno politicians. Some of them wonder why attending the UN assembly or opening the Khazanah Nasional office in San Francisco is so important, or why it was necessary to go to Thailand for his second break after the May 5 general election.

Actually, there is a simple explanation why he enjoys being outside the country so much. He needs a diversion from the daily mess that is Malaysia, a mess compounded by his willingness to allow shrill, fringe voices to dictate the tone of this country. And his inability to tackle the laundry list of issues from endemic corruption to the breakdown in law and order.

A laundry list that also includes: an increasingly right-wing Umno; an inept Cabinet; a combative opposition; fractured and irrelevant BN component parties; a widening budget deficit and the insatiable appetite of businessmen and cronies; and, not least, the hulking presence of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Against this backdrop, putting some space between Malaysia and himself is Najib's preferred option.

Think about it. What happens to children in a house where peace and quiet is a rare commodity and where the air is pregnant with tension and where every day seems like a battle? Usually the children find excuses to hang out in a friend's house, stay over with a cousin, where they may receive praise and affirmation.

What happens to a student who feels overmatched in school, overwhelmed by the demands of parents and teachers and under pressure from bullies? Chances are that the student will play truant, or do his best to limit his appearances in the classroom.

So it is with the Malaysian PM. Those who have been part of his entourage say that he is relaxed when away from home and loves pressing the flesh with foreign leaders and businessmen, talking about the Global Movement of Moderates and impressing them with his smooth delivery, sharp dressing and his ability to speak the language that Westerners like to hear.

In New York before an appreciative audience at the Council of Foreign Relations, he was applauded for arguing for "dialogue over confrontation, negotiation over conflict".

The irony is that in Malaysia, the country he leads, there is more confrontation than dialogue on race and religion.

The party he leads is not interested in compromise or the middle path, choosing instead to trample on the rights of those who did not vote for Umno/Barisan Nasional in GE13. And Najib has in recent weeks dropped all pretence, becoming instead an active supporter of the right-wing agenda.

Even The Economist, a publication which has been generous in its praise of Najib as a reformer in the past, noted in its current edition the unsavoury changes taking place here.

It noted that following BN's poor performance in 2013, "the party has reverted to the bad old ways of race-based politics to shore up the Malay base, at the expense of those who were ungrateful enough to vote for the Opposition".

"The main casualty of this retreat is Mr Najib himself. Before the election he had come to be seen as a great reformer... he repealed outdated security legislation and was slowly rolling back the system of ethnic preferences. Yet to survive an onslaught from his conservative wing, Mr Najib has been forced to backtrack abruptly," said The Economist.

It then went on to conclude that the stuttering Malaysian economy will have to raise billions for the new affirmative action programmes and noted that the brain drain of talented non-Malays will continue, disgusted by the overt racism here.

"So much for Mr Najib's great reforms," concluded the newsweekly.

When he returns to Malaysia next week, the PM will have to once again face the litany of problems in the country. But this week away from home, he can live in his bubble – where he is feted as a leader of moderates. – September 29, 2013.

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