

SYED NADZRI

Parallels between Razak and Najib



Tun Abdul Razak Hussein was described as a workhorse by Tunku Abdul Rahman

TOWARDS the end of one of his meetings with editors a few weeks ago, Datuk Seri Najib Razak was casually asked how he felt about his impending ascension to the prime ministership with the country going through such a turbulent time.

In the thick of verbal activities going on around him at that moment, that question unfortunately got lost in significance.

But the deputy prime minister, ever his cool self, somehow did manage a spontaneously succinct reply which I thought was noteworthy.

He just smiled and said: "It's nothing compared with what my father went through because he took over the reins in far more challenging conditions. The country was reeling from May 13."

Then a distraction forced the subject to be abruptly cut off. But prevailing conditions do have a way of bringing out this kind of topic in conversations every now and then -- like in the chat I had with a minister a few days ago.



Datuk Seri Najib Razak says his father took over during more challenging times

Yes. Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Najib's father, first assumed the national commander's role as head of the National Operations Council in 1969 when the going was so rough and furious. The May 13 race riots had just broken out (till today it is dubbed the darkest period in the nation's history), and as a result of the disturbances, emergency rule was declared and the Constitution was suspended for more than a year with the NOC running the country.

There was much tension in the air, the ruling Alliance did very badly in the May 11 general election, Penang fell to the opposition led by Gerakan (Kelantan remained under Pas), Umno was split following pressure on party president and prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to quit, race relations were at a very low ebb and the government was faced with subversive threats from communist insurgents.

Notice the parallels of some of the above with the present, the convergence extending even to a racially-charged funeral procession held for a chauvinistically-proclaimed martyr who had been shot by police just before May 13.

The similarities don't end there -- there were accusations that the MCA, then the only Chinese partner in the Alliance, was too pro-Malay; and, coincidentally, a few days before Razak formally took over the helm, Kuala Lumpur was strangely also paralysed by floods.

Though he was already running the country by virtue of his position as NOC head, Razak only officially became Umno president at the party's general assembly -- its first since the riots -- on Jan 23, 1971. With that he became Malaysia's second prime minister.

Razak, as Tunku always mentioned, was a workhorse. In the book *K. Das and the Tunku Tapes* compiled by Kua Kia Soong, Tunku had this to say about his successor:

"Tun Razak might not have been lucky as I was because he did not have a Tun Razak to help him, in the way that I had. All those ministers were new except for one or two who were with him in the early days.

"And then perhaps Tun Razak's ways of doing things were different from mine because he was a very hard worker."

Records show that this no-nonsense approach to prevent a recurrence of May 13 was quite evident when Razak took over as he immediately announced his priorities, including amending the Constitution to ensure that "sensitive issues" would not be challenged simply through blatant politicking and abuse of the democratic process.

And there lies the inevitability of lining up the similarities in the challenges and uncanny parallels faced by dad and son -- in different eras, of course -- with Najib well on the road to becoming the country's sixth prime minister 40 years on.

Which brings me back to the chat with the minister late last week which, given the current climate as well as the background of the person I was speaking to, was an eye-opener.

The senior politician said the challenges facing Najib seemed to be as difficult if not more demanding than those faced by his father despite the tribulations of May 13. But, like his father, Najib would sail through, he added.

In addition to all those parallels mentioned above, the minister said Najib would have to contend with not only MCA but also other senior Barisan Nasional partners losing support, particularly the MIC and Gerakan.

Then, the minister said, Najib was also up against a concerted smear campaign by the opposition, bloated in proportion and viciousness by the huge strides in information and communication technology.

"There was no Internet, instant text messaging and mobile phones 40 years ago," he noted. "Today, slander can travel twice or three times the speed of sound under the guise of anonymity."

Then, of course, there is the looming global economic crisis which is said to be the worst in history. Najib is tackling that today by unveiling another stimulus package in Parliament.

So I asked the minister how he sees Najib in the face of all these challenges.

"From his behaviour and expressions, especially during big and important meetings, Najib appears to be well in control," he replied.

"He will do well like his father, the workhorse."

And yes, Razak would be 87 tomorrow if he had lived.

*** Courtesy of the Writer