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Khairy's dilemma: To speak or not to speak

By Ooi Kee Beng

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IT MAY be true that when elephants joust, mousedeer get trampled. However, medium-size creatures are not out of the woods either.

In a political battle played out in the mass media, a bad choice of words at a bad moment can be fatal. It is often advisable to keep quiet. Silence may of course also be understood as weakness, but at least it leaves room for doubt.

In the ongoing spat between former premier Mahathir Mohamad and present Premier Abdullah Badawi, the deputy chief of Umno Youth and son-in-law of the Prime Minister, Mr Khairy Jamaluddin, should have taken a page out of his father-in-law's book.

Keeping silent was the strategy adopted very early on by Datuk Seri Abdullah, even before Tun Dr Mahathir decided to launch open attacks on him on June 7. He started breaking his 'elegant silence' only after his attacker had run out of steam.

On Aug 7, Datuk Seri Abdullah appeared on national television to comment on his predecessor's demands. He managed a mediocre performance that opened him to further criticism, especially about the business practices of his son Kamaluddin and his son-in-law Khairy.

But then the lack of rhetorical success does not seem to harm a man in his position. His exercise of the power of patronage more than makes up for the lack of conviction in his words. As he himself said, he is the Prime Minister, and with that comes the ability that compensates for what could have been fatal failings for someone not at the top.

In that context, the Ninth Malaysia Plan has been a blessed opportunity that he has made full use of. The lucky man that he is, he did not have to choose the timing - it was chosen for him. He has had the chance to promise development projects to Penang and to present a vision of concerted advancement in southern Johor; both these states are where support for him has always been strong. It is now even more solid.

To the rural population, Datuk Seri Abdullah has been able to speak of agriculture as a strong value-adding industry. However, given the fact that competition in biotech is unrelenting and value-adding industries tend to become less and less labour-intensive, the idea of large-scale agricultural growth benefiting the masses seems far-fetched. Nevertheless, it has rhetorical value.

Such is the strength of incumbency, even when one is fighting one's predecessor. Despite rumours that Tun Dr Mahathir has a huge 'war chest' he can use to convince Umno delegates over the coming months to reinstate abandoned policies, Datuk Seri Abdullah appears to be confident that he can ride out the storm.

His son-in-law, however, being middle-rank, is easier game for Tun Dr Mahathir. He also does not have the patience or the wisdom to keep quiet. As deputy chief of Umno Youth, his powers of patronage are limited. Also, with the political mood that Tun Dr Mahathir has recently created throughout the country, being son-in-law to the Premier is currently a disadvantage.

Mr Khairy knows this. However, the few initiatives he has taken lately have been transparently opportunistic. His decision to sell his shares in ECM Libra Avenue earlier this month in response to Tun Dr Mahathir's allegations about nepotism has not vindicated him. For many, it gave further credence to the former premier's accusations.

Mr Khairy lost even more political credibility with the general public when he attempted to chalk up points with Malay voters by claiming that he sold his shares at a greater loss than necessary because he wished to sell to a Malay firm rather than to non-Malays.

His propensity to play the racial card when under pressure continued to get him into trouble when he told an Umno Youth division in Kedah last week that Chinese Malaysians would take advantage of the situation if Umno continued to be split. This led to unexpected protests from Gerakan and the Malaysian Chinese Association, parties representing the Chinese within the ruling coalition.

Although immediately declared a 'non-issue' by Umno Youth chief Hishamuddin Hussein, this 'misunderstanding' contributes to the perception of a trend whereby issues, whether racial or not, are given unnecessary currency in the wake of Tun Dr Mahathir's incessant attacks, threats and ultimatum. These threaten to fill the vacuum created by the regime's ban on discussions of other issues deemed 'sensitive'.

The powerless can be silenced, and the powerful can choose to speak or to ignore accusations. The not-so-powerful and the not-so-powerless have a harder time recognising their options.

- *The writer is a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. This is a personal comment.*

PLAYING THE RACIAL CARD

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