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Don't hinder the process of justice

WHY is it that some foreign rights groups get all worked up when some Malaysian personalities whose names they could hardly pronounce are detained by the authorities under OSA or ISA or some other legislation they described as draconian but which are also, actually, products of their forefathers' inventions? A student of anthropology or psychology would draw up a long list of theories on why they behave in such a way. But it'll all boil down to these outsiders' inability - even refusal - to sympathise with what are, to them, foreign. In this information technology age, the power of their own media in dictating popular beliefs, and sometimes their governments' foreign policy, play a part in influencing their views about the world beyond their own backyards.

In such cases, their opinions of governments involved - usually of so-called Third World countries - are predictable, stereotype and not very high. In the case of the arrests of four Malaysians for sedition this week, they see the Malaysian Government as intolerant and draconian. They condemn what they see as an attempt at further suppressing freedom of the press without bothering to find out if that freedom had been abused beyond reasonable limits for some narrow political and commercial gain. They allege that the action was politically motivated and overlooked the fact that the two Opposition members among the four arrested have very little political influence left after their defeats in November's general elections.

Malaysia has "again resorted to strong-arm tactics to silence its critics rather than playing by the rules of international law", according to Robert Varenik of the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. The Southeast Asian Press Alliance in an open letter to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad expresses outrage at the arrests of the editor and printer and demands that charges be dropped. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists has also come out to champion the freedom for the Malaysian media following the arrest of the editor of an Opposition party's organ.

What's more disturbing than the ranting of these foreign groups, though, is the fact that increasingly some locals are singing the chorus, sometimes louder than the original foreign tune. Some have become even more enthusiastic and vociferous than their foreign counterparts in criticising and condemning the authorities. But unlike the foreign rights groups, the Malaysian outfits seem quite happy to be quoted by the foreign media for hitting out at their own Government and the system that has brought about the peace and harmony that they themselves are obviously taking for granted. But when it comes to severe violations in other countries by the very governments that preach the virtues of democracy and freedom of rights, very few dared to tell London or Washington to play by the rules of international law. The Pinochet saga is just the latest in a string of incidents regarded by a few as justice but considered by many as serious violation of rights. Remember Noriega, who was abducted in his country and taken out against his will to be subjected to foreign laws and standards? And Ben Laden. And Saddam Hussein. What if it happens to a Malaysian?

Yes, in this country, as in other countries, citizens are detained for all kinds of offences or to facilitate investigation into charges against them or others. This is not a lawless country and politicians or editors

of Opposition newsletters cannot be placed above the law, which is what some of the rights groups seem to suggest. The important thing is that the process of justice in Malaysia must be allowed to be carried out and seen to be carried out. In their eagerness to get their voices heard, it is hoped that the rights groups, whether they are based in New York or Kuala Lumpur, do not try to obstruct this process.

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