

Concern over stifled freedom of thought, expression

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs: Civil libertarians hope domestic security policies contemplated by nations still reeling from the shock of the Sept 11 attacks on the US will not result in a fractured world of paranoid autocracies.

The speakers at a forum held here today unanimously maintained that the world will eventually regret it if the public outrage at the terrorist attacks compel national governments to pursue absolutist legislation.

Legal counsel and public

figure Datuk Dominic Puthucheary feared that a population made angry by terrorism will voluntarily surrender civil liberties in return for state guarantees of personal safety.

"No matter how laudable one's intentions may be, giving up one's civic responsibilities will eventually create a mindset that no longer values freedom of thought and expression," he said.

These liberties underpin the social contract based on the rule of law, and yielding them for the

sake of increased security will land a terrible blow on the foundations of a constitutional government.

"Since the Sept 11 tragedy, there has been an upsurge in popular support in western countries for military action abroad and strong anti-terrorist laws at home," he said.

"But we should take care not to enact a law that restricts a person's right to think and act within his conscience; we should not condemn someone merely on suspicion, without the slightest shred of

evidence."

Agreeing with Puthucheary, Parti Rakyat Malaysia president Dr Syed Husin Ali warned that all draconian measures, once established, easily lend themselves to uses beyond those envisaged by the policies' original makers.

"Such measures can be used to suppress legitimate opposition and create a psychology of public fear," he said.

"Thus, an unscrupulous political elite may come to power without checks on its authority."