

SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF HOME AFFAIRS
OF THE RELEASE OF DETAINEES
AT RADIO AND TELEVISION MALAYSIA
ON 24TH AUGUST 1967

wish to speak to you today on a problem that has been with us ever since Merdeka and has engaged the anxiety and concern of the Government all the time. It is the question of freedom and democracy.

We had achieved freedom in 1957, almost exactly ten years ago. Just before that was a brief period of self-government, a period of, what I would call, 'apprenticeship'. Then six years after independence came the formation of Malaysia.

These were major events in the life of our people. Yet they were events that had taken place against a grim background of an armed insurrection accompanied by a sustained effort to subvert the established order of things. I refer to our system of parliamentary democracy, a system in which one man holds one vote and the ordinary citizen is the ultimate arbiter of political power.

We have succeeded in preserving this system in the face of such acute dangers not normally encountered by newly independent countries. But if we had not been unremitting in our efforts and unflagging in our determination, I seriously doubt if the vast majority of our people would be able to go about their lives with the sense of assurance as they do today. Whenever I reflect upon this I cannot help but feel a spontaneous warmth towards our security forces and pay tribute to those many who have laid down their lives so that we may all go on living in an atmosphere of tolerance and faith in the essential goodness of our people.

I do not wish to retail the measure of human woe or the opportunities for heroism that has been permitted by the past. I shall leave that to the more dispassionate and discerning and perhaps discriminating minds of historians.

I, like the rest of my colleagues in Government, am a committed man. We are committed to safeguard and defend the constitutional and democratic basis of our society. And this act of commitment involves us in the making of decisions in the national interest, decisions that are sometimes unpopular and often enough trouble those who, like us, subscribe to the same ideals.

The business of every Government is to govern. We cannot afford the luxury of our critics and antagonists who tear questions out of context, deliberately simplify issues that call for delicate examination, and gaily move resolutions without considering the full import of their implementation. I can understand this if it is meant to be a straight-forward though vulgar appeal for votes. But as a Government we cannot accept it if it is designed to stir passions to a point that threatens the security of the country.

And I must admit that we ourselves have to maintain a delicate balance between internal security and civil liberties. For anyone who believes in the will

of the people asserted through the ballot box, must, of necessity, also believe in the maximum freedom practicable. It would be academic of me to try to describe what that maximum should be.

But the minimum is clearly definable in political terms. It means, as I have suggested earlier, that every ordinary citizen of this country, no matter what his breeding or social status, can, by the exercise of his franchise, decide what Government he wants in office.

We have in no way inhibited this basic right of our people. Rather we have thwarted the threats to this right. And in doing this we clearly recognise that we are encroaching upon the very ideals we are seeking to establish, namely, full freedom of political expression and activity consistent with existing social and civic discipline. But it is essential that we should do this in order to safeguard those ideals.

This is not a contradiction in ideals or policy as some would like to make out. Rather it is in advancement of it. The contradiction would lie if we accorded the democratic process to those who would unhesitatingly subvert and destroy it. Often it is these very people who cry out most against us for what we have done. They hope by utilising good and decent citizens with laudable and generous instincts to pressure the Government into giving them the greatest possible latitude in which they could operate to the detriment of the constitutional process.

The former Minister of Home Affairs, Tun (Dr) Ismail has had the difficult task of explaining to some, who have made representations on behalf of detainees to him personally, why their continued detention was necessary. I who have taken charge or responsibility for this Ministry am myself confronted with the same burden.

We regard it as a burden because it is one of the most distasteful things we have to do when we have to order the arrest and detention of a person under the Internal Security Act. We feel it almost staggers our chances of creating a liberal and tolerant society.

But these painful decisions have to be made. They are decisions not just in the interests of security as such, but security in the sense that a real and actual threat to the democratic structure is constituted.

We in Malaysia have created and pulled through a democratic system against formidable forces that have sought to undermine it. After all this time I feel like the one who exclaimed: 'We have pulled through!'

But it would be misleading, and not right of me to suggest that movements subversive of our system do not exist. The fact is they do, the threat is real. I do not wish to exaggerate the imminence of this danger, nor minimise it. We are in a position to cope with those who choose to resort to violence and disturbance. We shall make short shrift of them. I

Today it is the covert and clandestine activity of individuals who owe their affiliations to foreign ideologies and Governments that must be tracked and exposed to full public light. This is going to be a more difficult exercise, if only because men engaged in such activity move in various guises and seek to achieve respectability by their apparent reasonability. But whatever their masquerade or

camouflage we shall act when their intention are apparent to us. And all those innocents associating with them will have ample opportunity to stay away, unless of course they are deliberately consorting - in which case they cannot claim to be innocent.

I feel I have to say this because as far as national security is concerned we are still not out of the woods. To that extent we are still forced to maintain this balance between security and civil liberties.

But as the threat to security recedes so must there be an extension of civil liberties.

In the more settled democracies of the world this question of security and the right of the individual have been subjects of constant and heated discussion - on an academic plane. It is a sort of situation we would like to move towards. But it is a movement that can only gain momentum if you, the public, come out fully and firmly on the side of liberal principles and against all that, insidiously negate it.

It was an eminent American jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who stated that any denial of fundamental liberties is only defensible if there is 'a clear and present danger' to the security of the country. I will state clearly that the danger is present, but it is by no means clear to a great many who have taken security for granted.

It is sometimes not clear because the evidence before Government cannot be made available to the public for this would incriminate the sources of information. This would not have to be the case if the guilty ones concerned overtly expressed their affiliations. But since they operate in hidden ways we have to pursue them in similar ways, and the upshot of it all is a cloak-and-dagger activity that leaves a great many people confused and concerned.

Despite all this, it is the duty of all of us to strive to raise the threshold of tolerance and to accept in the process a measure of risk. We need to treasure security as much as we value the basic freedom of the individual.

As a Government we are caught between two contending considerations. We must strike a mean instead of taking the crude way out by showing toughness and over-emphasizing security, or showing softness and risking it.

Any Minister of Home Affairs has upon his conscience demands which he would wish to avoid. But once charged with Ministerial responsibility we cannot afford to equivocate like Prince Hamlet. We have to decide, and let me assure you that we are a decisive Government.

The question before us today is that, in view of a certain change in the security situation, must we continue to keep in detention people who have been, and still are, a real threat to security?

Let me admit that, much as we would want to, we are not satisfied that many could be released from detention. Yet I have today ordered the release of 180 persons (even though I am by no means convinced that they have come clean on their subversive affiliations), who by their conduct, background and demeanour have evinced an inclination to change.

Some of those who shall be released may still be security risks. But I have taken a great deal into account in regarding their release as an acceptable security

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risk, and hope they will not let us down. I also hope this act of kindness and human compassion will not be construed as a sign of 'softening' on our part in our determination to uphold and defend the ideals and principles of democracy which we firmly believe.

May I finally express the thought that those who are released may find comfort and happiness in their return to ordinary life.