

**The wind in the 'lalang' rising again**  
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**COMMENT** The wind may be blowing in the 'lalang' once more, echoing overzealous 'gardeners' whose weeding once aimed at more than just unwanted undergrowth.

A tale we should heed well, as the government of the day may be geared for similar 'pruning'. But before we look at its indigence in our time, perhaps its best to peek into history.

March 14, 1988, four months after the conclusion of Ops Lalang, the Home Ministry tabled order paper number 14, entitled 'Towards Preserving National Security', before Parliament.

The white paper detailed government justifications for rounding up the usual suspects in the infamous operation, the year before.

The swoop saw 106 individuals detained without trial, the right to public assembly suspended and licences of four newspapers revoked.

Such draconian measures our own founding father, Tunku Abdul Rahman lamented (right) as akin to a police state.

Despite recent contentions on who ordered the purge, police top brass or then premier Mahathir Mohamad, the paper made no such distinctions, it only said that "the government decided to act".

One can only infer that it was the sitting government of the time, which Mahathir led. More so, the report was signed off by the Home Ministry, a portfolio that he kept close to his breast from 1986 to 1999.

**The bucks stop here**

Despite his current protestation, the finger still points at the former premier, who headed the government and was home minister. But the author of Melayu mudah lupa remembered a different history, blaming the police for Ops Lalang.

"I actually met all of the opposition members (beforehand) and assured them that they would not be arrested. And you know what the police did? They arrested them. My credibility is gone," Mahathir (left) said in an interview with journalist and author Tom Plate.

DAP parliamentary leader Lim Kit Siang, one of those arrested then, refuted this, denying Mahathir ever met him at all, challenging the former premier to name those he allegedly met and promised such.

Then head of Special Branch and former IGP Hanif Omar, defended his former boss. The police he said, were behind the arrests, but laid the blame on Mahathir for signing additional orders once the 60-day Internal Security Act detention period lapsed.

"It was up to him to decide from then on," said Hanif.

But even if police did act on their own, the ultimate responsibility must still be Mahathir's alone. As constitutional law expert Abdul Aziz Bari puts it, "the buck stops at the PM's door".

And if history were to relate, the former prime minister well known for his Machiavellian tendencies, would not have allowed such independence of the police in his day.

### **National security, or political safety?**

But the important question is not who ordered the purge. Most troubling are the 'excuses' for Ops Lalang in the white paper. Similarities with which has cropped up recently, or so claimed the powers that be.

There were six chapters in the 1988 report, each touching on an aspect which the government claimed necessitated the operation to halt "activities that was prejudicial to public order and national security".

The chapters touched upon the pandering of sensitive issues, the spectre of 'Christianisation', radical 'Islamists', student-socialist uprising, communist terrorists and recalcitrant newspapers.

Not too far fetched perhaps to see echoes of such 'concerns' in our current day and age, with sensitive issues being pandered to by pet NGOs of a certain Malay party and the double standards of police enforcement of public order regulations.

The government has also been trying to stifle the resurgence of student activism and the rise of civil society in rallies and demonstrations as being rather alarming.

Not to mention attention given to PAS, Christian organisations, and religious issues, pitting them against each other. The existence of terrorists on home soil has also been talked of much of late, despite flimsy evidence.

While the government has also continually rapped news publications for being 'uncooperative' with its agenda promising dire warnings and restrictive controls. Things seem gloomy indeed, by such reckoning.

But are those real concerns or drummed up simulacra and government propaganda? Are they legitimate national security issues, or 'boogeymen' conjured to safeguard the political safety of a certain 53-year old regime?

After all without the spectre of racial riots or religious conflicts, there is no need for such pervasive favoritism to soothe savage cronies being espoused by the BN regime. Such archaic political structures must be dismantled for good, for the good of the rakyat.

### **Warnings and admonitions**

But more dangerously, probably scared excrement-less by the turmoils which saw the removal of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, Najib (below) may be desperate enough to turn to such tactics to shore his stewardship of the once unshakable BN regime.

Observe his naked warning that "We will not allow it to happen here", and the veiled admonition to businesses to play ball with the government, with an or else implied.

"This is not the time to experiment and take chances with your future. I am sure you know

what I am referring to... business people are always pragmatic and astute," said Najib at the SMI Malaysia Chinese New Year open house in Petaling Jaya yesterday.

Najib's warning to businesses is perhaps to pre-empt commercial support of any popular uprising, if not to opposition electoral coffers.

After all, the highly organised protesters of Tahrir Square and elsewhere in Egypt would not have lasted as long as they had without corporate funding or support of some sort.

Running a popular uprising, much like an opposition electoral campaign in Malaysia's lopsided political environment, are both expensive undertakings.

With Hosny Mubarak having fled Cairo and the reins of power changing hands earlier today, the message must have been hammered home more urgently to Najib and the BN, thus the need to hammer the masses not to try similar tricks.

### **'Egypt and Tahrir Square!'**

As such, it would not be surprising if upon the premier's orders or the 'self-initiative' of an 'independent' police, the winds may sweep through the 'lalang' once more.

But this time, such tactics may not dampen resistance against Najib and the BN regime, but may instead light a conflagration, the Egypt-style popular uprising they so desperately want to avoid.

For in this day and age of instant mobile communications and the Internet, diffusion of information and pinions of control no longer work. It is more difficult for the powers that be to intimidate the public with propaganda.

The advent of social networks have also empowered the masses to be able to organise at the grassroots level, even if the leadership is taken away. Especially if the leadership is incarcerated, can one imagine the anger that will come into play?

More so, with subsidies being withdrawn and the public asked to tighten their belts in 'hard' times, as crony corporates and BN political elites continue to wallow in wealth and reap untold profits at the people's expense, the tinder is dry indeed.

Another 'lalang' may just be the straw that will break the BN's back, the tinder with which the rakyat strikes back.

"Egypt and Tahrir Square!" should be a warning to BN, as it is a rallying cry for the rakyat. Change course now, or be changed by the impending flood.