

Russian Roulette in Putrajaya
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MP SPEAKS Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's government is playing Russian Roulette.

This is the practice of loading a bullet in one chamber of a revolver, spinning the cylinder and pulling the trigger while pointing the gun at one's head.

Yes, it's potentially dangerous. I am referring to both the Peaceful Assembly Bill 2011 and the government's audacity.

In September, Najib scrapped Section 27 of the Police Act that requires a permit for holding rallies. It has been replaced with the more repressive Peaceful Assembly Bill with unacceptable restrictions on freedom of assembly, association and expression - the fundamental principles in a democracy.

The Bill outlaws all street protests, forces the organisers to give one month's notice to the police, regulates, restricts and imposes conditions on an assembly and prohibits anyone under the age of 15 from taking part.

Furthermore, protesters can be slapped with a RM20,000 fine while organisers who fail to give sufficient notice can be fined RM10,000. This is sheer madness.

But it also clearly reflects the political game-plan of Najib's government. It outlines their fear of losing power in the next general election. It caricatures a desperate government which would clamp down on civil liberties to hold on to power.

And most importantly, the Bill demonstrates that we have rogue politicians ruling the country as the stifling provisions are a flagrant breach of the federal constitution, that allows for freedom of expression and does not stipulate any age barriers.

In a sharp twist, the proposed law provides the police with even more power and makes it legitimate for them to take action against protesters. It also empowers the home minister to make regulations for the enforcement of the proposed provisions.

Propaganda drum

None of these provisions are in line with Najib's promise to enable a more vibrant democratic space.

The tightening of the noose is very much like the law of the jungle disguised as justice - and, in this case, passed off as one which is crucial to maintain national security.

Therefore, we could conclude that all this while Najib has been pounding the propaganda drum.

It also spells more doom for the nation. I would not be surprised if the government comes up with more policies to clamp down on legitimate dissent.

Our fear that a more oppressive law will replace the Internal Security Act does hold water.

We have seen the prime minister attend a concert, cycle in Penang, announce a so-called people-friendly budget and host a get together for Manchester United fans at his home. Newspapers and the alternative media have reported that Najib's popularity rating is soaring.

After all these populist measures, he turns around and plays his original self. And that too when he is seeking a fresh mandate through the next general election.

This raises crucial questions - will the BN play extremely dirty in the polls? Has Najib endorsed the Bill because he knows he has nothing to lose?

Whatever the analysis, we the rakyat simply cannot take the Bill sitting down. If we do not act now, it would send a signal to the government which would clearly translate to mean it can bulldoze into our democratic space and civil liberties.

I therefore concur with law expert Abdul Aziz Bari that this Bill must be challenged in court, for it violates the federal constitution. This would send a strong message to the government that we will not allow the ruling elite to trample on our rights.

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