

**Najib - a reformer though not by the fine print**  
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COMMENT Though he insists on saying so, it is a misnomer to think of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak as a transformative leader.

Hyperbolic claims are par for the course in politics.

But an appraising public has to separate the hype from the actual when assessing incumbent leaders, especially ones headed for pivotal elections seeking an endorsement they say they need to make more changes.

"Trust me to make the changes," appears to be the PM's constant refrain.

najib pc in parliamnet on altantuya murder case allegations 030708If what changes he presently makes are for real, the public would excuse the exaggeration of hype Najib and his boosters continually employ about him being a transformative leader.

His administration's hedged permission for the Bersih sit-down protest planned for April 28 and the provisions of the Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill just tabled in Parliament, which is intended to replace the odious ISA, are proof of the point the PM is not a transformational leader, interested in substantive rather than delusive change.

Instead he is more a transactional leader, in that he shows a willingness to manipulate, accommodate and revise within a given system.

A transformative leader the PM is not: he does not have the gumption to transcend or reconstruct the system to respond to pressing national needs; he merely improvises within it.

On the same day that the government tabled the Security Offences Bill, Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein announced its stand that Bersih could go ahead with their protest but had to consult with the police on a "suitable" location for their rally.

The consultation with police was the catch to the permission. What looked like a refreshing change to government policy which invariably has been to proscribe demonstrations, was spoilt by the 'consult the cops' proviso which soon metamorphosed into a 'get City Hall's permission first' because the latter supposedly have the run of the place.

That proviso would make Bersih feel like it is doing business with a used-car salesman: care would be needed about the fine print.

Ham-fisted approach

A similar wariness is warranted with regard to the just-tabled Security Offences Bill, supposedly an important step in the liberalising agenda Najib promised on Sept 15 last year when he said he was embarked on making Malaysia the "best democracy".

That assertion came as his administration sought to refurbish its credentials after being battered by criticism, from abroad and internally, over its handling of an impressive march organised on July 9 last year by electoral reform pressure group Bersih.

NONThe Najib government's ham-fisted approach to the march and the issue of electoral reform

espoused by the impressive throngs that gathered in support Bersih's agenda constituted a public relations disaster.

The PM responded by using to advantage the levers of the 'bully pulpit' - the national pedestal provided by state-owned electronic and print media - on an auspicious occasion (Sept 15 was the eve of Malaysia Day) to hold forth on the attractions of a new and liberal deal for Malaysians.

He promised reforms in the areas of the right of citizens to assemble and to be free from arbitrary arrest, as well as changes to restrictive press laws.

In short, he was promising to make the rights and freedoms vouchsafed by the constitution bequeathed to the country at its birth in 1957, which were subsequently trammled by Najib's autocratic predecessors, a reality.

Just as one in a democracy is entitled to his or her opinion but not their own facts, so leaders are entitled to their hype but not to the realities their actions impact.

A catch in new law

The Peaceful Assembly Bill 2011 that was tabled and passed by Parliament late last year, as part of the PM's ballyhooed liberalising agenda, recognised the right of citizens to demonstrate but hedged it with bureaucratic impositions.

It encapsulated the tenor of the PM's reforms - they were going to be transactional rather than transformational.

If one felt that in what is regarded as the final meeting of Parliament before the polls, the PM would rescue his credentials as reformed things by transforming the whole scenario with respect to detention without trial, as provided for in the Internal Security Act 1960 law, one has to think again.

Though the Security Offences Bill limits the initial period of detention, disallows such previous grounds for detention as one's beliefs - both ameliorations of draconian provisions in the predecessor ISA - it still allows for incarceration when a detainee has been freed by the courts, allowing police to appeal while holding their quarry.

This is the catch to a new law that is supposed to a substantive change to the provisions of its much reviled predecessor - a transactional, not a transformative change. Just like the PM as leader.



