

**As media protests mount, heads must roll**  
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**By Hafiz Yatim**

COMMENT With journalists from the mainstream and alternative media holding protests yesterday on World Press Freedom Day, over the high-handed action of the police in assaulting several journalists covering Bersih 3.0, stern action is needed on the culprits responsible.

NONE It is not only the police responsible for such actions who should face the music, but also those who gave the orders or condoned it, and Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein should take responsibility and accountability and not run away from it.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has also announced the formation of a special panel to investigate the police assault on media personnel who were covering the protest.

However, questions remain on Najib's aspiration that "Malaysia be the best democracy in the world" following the crackdown by the authorities on the protesters and also journalists.

To make matters worse, Saturday's assault on journalists comes five days before journalists all over the world celebrate World Press Freedom Day, a day which recognises their contribution to democracy and freedom of expression and speech, as well as an independent media.

NONE United States Deputy Secretary of State for International Organisation Esther Brimmer (left in photo), on being asked to comment on the developments in Malaysia - the country being a member of the prestigious Human Rights Council - yesterday said those who have chosen to run for the seat should have upheld the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

"This includes freedom of expression. Those on the UN Human Rights Council should uphold the principles and take up the responsibility since you are on the council.

"You (Malaysia) chose to run for position to be in the council but the actions done are counter to the principles. This is something which we feel (Malaysia) should take up responsibly - that you are on the council and you should uphold the principles that justify selection," she said.

Malaysia's post in the council runs until 2013, and it is already in its second term.

Brimmer was met by journalists during a question-and-answer session on the sidelines of a United Nations conference in Tunis on the dangers facing journalists, themed World Press Freedom Day.

She also said there is a need for Malaysia to allow free access to information and not suppress it, in obvious reference to mainstream media reports and also edited versions of BBC and Al Jazeera news coverage of Bersih 3.0.

NONE US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in her World Press Freedom address, said when a free media is under attack anywhere, all human rights are under attack everywhere.

"That is why the United States joins its global partners in calling for the release of all imprisoned journalists in every country across the globe and for the end to intimidation.

"Let us honour the many brave men and women who risk their lives every day to keep the rest of us informed, to keep governments accountable and societies more democratic, prosperous and successful. And let us continue to champion those who stand for media freedom as a powerful force for progress," she said in a video message on World Press Freedom Day yesterday held at the Tunisian presidential palace Moncef Marzouki.

## Pressure to take action

Now with such international and local condemnation and abuses being highlighted, Najib will be pressured to take action.

The actions of the police have certainly poured cold water on Najib's calls for reforms and attempts to improve Malaysia's ranking on human rights issues, concurrent with a decline in its press freedom ranking.

It was certainly hoped that Najib and the police could have used the experience of the Bersih 2.0 rally to handle matters properly and in a more professional manner.

The Bersih 2.0 inquiry by the Malaysian Human Rights Council (Suhakam) is still on-going, and it was hoped that police would have used the opportunity to improve its observance of human rights matters and treatment of the media.

However, the Malaysian Bar Council had pointed out that police brutality had not lessened but indeed worsened in its handling of Bersih 3.0, where its president, Lim Chee Wee, pointed out that all the problems that were highlighted last year on the use of force, have magnified this year.

NONE "So far as police brutality goes, we have observed more police brutality (this time). So far as indiscriminate and arbitrary use of water cannon and tear gas, our observers saw far more (instances)," Lim had said in its preliminary report.

Even Najib's call for the formation of a new panel yesterday is seen as ignoring the role of Suhakam, as pointed out by Petaling Jaya Utara MP Tony Pua.

"Is it because the cabinet is worried that Suhakam's findings will be detrimental to both the police force and the government, and hence Najib is attempting to set up a new panel which will be more 'sympathetic' towards the government's cause," asked Pua.

The Petaling Jaya Utara lawmaker said the government's announcement was "curious" since it had already set up Suhakam under the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Act 1999 to handle matters of human rights infringements.

## A missed opportunity

Certainly the Bersih 3.0 rally was an opportunity given to Najib's administration to possibly redeem itself over mistakes committed during the Bersih 2.0 rally. This is especially after his calls on the eve of Malaysia Day last year.

NONE Many who had participated in the rally had said that if there were no crackdown and Najib had allowed the use of the iconic and historic Dataran Merdeka as the gathering place, his administration would certainly come out of it with bonus points and support from the public.

As such, it is a missed opportunity by Najib for him and his advisers.

Hence, with the setting up of the proposed special panel as announced by Najib, the prime minister must be seen to be sincere in his efforts.

Forming another panel and accepting its recommendations without taking the necessary action on the accountability of individuals holding key posts in the Home Ministry and also the Public Order and Internal Security divisions in the police would be seen as weak and indecisive.

As past panels in the form of the royal commissions of inquiry into the VK Lingam tape and also Teoh Beng Hock's death had seen recommendations made, but none of them being translated into action, the

pressure is mounting for heads to roll and the government to be accountable.

Will Najib have the decisiveness and political will to handle the matter, especially with the Umno general assembly approaching on May 11 and 13 and the general election approaching, remains to be seen.

Certainly assaulting a journalist, or in this case violence committed reportedly against 10 media personnel, or even the general public for that matter is not to be taken lightly.

Assaulting journalists is seen as an assault on human rights and democracy itself.

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