

**Fresh crackdown ahead of GE13?**  
**MalaysiaKini.com**  
**July 11, 2012**  
**By Nigel Aw**

Back in 2007, a series of massive street protests and a string of scandals ranging from judicial fixing to the unravelling of the Port Klang Free Zone (PKFZ) saw BN on the defensive.

The year was capped by one of the harshest crackdowns since 2001, with more than 100 arrested and charged with taking part in the Hindraf protest. Five of its leaders were also detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA).

Ironically, about a year before premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi called for snap polls, he had urged the public to tell him the truth. In the end, he didn't quite like what he was hearing...

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's administration is today similarly plagued with scandals ranging from the Ampang LRT Line extension project to the Scorpene submarines corruption probe in France, on top of the infamous National Feedlot Corporation (NFC) scandal.

Najib, despite promising to make Malaysia "the world's best democracy", clamped down on Bersih with a sledgehammer - not once, but twice.

And like Abdullah's slide from grace, Najib's press conferences have become increasing infrequent, making it difficult for journalists to query the premier about the string of scandals.

With less than a year left to the next general election, the question playing on the minds of many is whether history will repeat itself with another crackdown on dissent as Najib's administration loses its shine.

Wan Saiful Wan Jan (2)The Companies Commission's sudden "routine inspection" of the records of human rights group Suaram, which is pursuing the Scorpene case in France, and the police investigation into PKR strategy director Rafizi Ramli under the Official Secrets Act for revealing documents allegedly showing that Najib had interfered in the Ampang LRT line extension tender could well be tell-tale signs.

However, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas) chief executive officer Wan Saiful Wan Jan (left) believes that a Mahathir-style crackdown is unlikely.

"If I was the government, I would be very worried about launching a crackdown before an election," Wan Saiful said.

Any such move would only alienate fence-sitters and galvanise opponents at a time when the BN is desperately trying to claw back support lost in the 2008 general election.

'Even suppression has transformed'

Political analyst Khoo Kay Peng noted that - like Najib's many transformation programmes - the federal ruling coalition's method of silencing critics has also been "transformed".

"I think the modus operandi has changed, it is now difficult to justify major crackdowns on

political opponents.

"Instead, they are using other means, such as using the judiciary to charge people in court even though there is no case, just to create trouble, and even the use of thugs," Khoo said.

An example, he said, was the decision to slap Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim and PKR deputy president Azmin Ali with several charges for their involvement in the Bersih 3.0 rally, and the unprecedented lawsuit against S Ambiga and other leaders of the electoral reform movement.

Khoo said the traces of a Mahathir-style crackdown, such as harassment of civil society, are the result of the former premier's continued influence on the current administration.

"Recently, Mahathir said in the media that liberalisation had to be curtailed and too much freedom would destabilise the government.

"He (Mahathir) is influential and Najib has to listen to him to keep things in balance. Mahathir does not need to go to the prime minister's office to give instructions, he has people from his faction to speak for him and to pressure Najib."

During his 22-year reign, Mahathir gained notoriety for Operasi Lalang in October 1987, when 106 activists and politicians were detained under the ISA.

During his tenure, too, immigrant rights activist Irene Fernandez was charged with 'publishing false news' after she revealed abuses at an immigrant detention centre. This led to a 13-year legal battle before she was acquitted.

'Political violence may worsen'

While the upside to Najib's "sprinkle" of reforms has seen the end of the ISA, making it more difficult for a massive crackdown, Khoo said the new approach of using non-institutional methods would become more prominent.

He said he expects political violence to worsen as the nation moves toward the next election.

"I think it's going to grow a lot more hostile as the police are not doing anything about it, and many of these thugs are low-ranking Umno Youth members," he claimed.

Since early this year, harassment has been targeted at Pakatan ceramah sessions, some of which turned violent, such as those in Sembrong, Gambang, Merlimau and Lembah Pantai.

While the days of detention without trial for political opponents may be over, Khoo said, these new strategies of harassment would still not reflect positively on the BN.

"It actually doesn't help. Human nature is such that no one will agree to intimidation or bullying tactics," he said.

On the cyber front, another non-institutional method is becoming more prevalent with all three Pakatan Rakyat component party websites and a number of news portals, including Malaysiakini, which were hit with cyber attacks by anonymous sources early this month.

Rafizi's blog, which detailed the alleged Ampang LRT Line extension scandal, was also

brought down by a separate wave of attacks.

This, Wan Saiful said, may reflect badly on the federal government, even though the origin of these attacks could not be proven.

"This is a new thing and it's difficult to prove where it is coming from. But when only websites from the opposition are affected, people will have their suspicions and make their own conclusions. It may backfire," he said.

malaysiakini discussion 050208 khoo kay pengHowever, Wan Saiful said, a positive development by the BN is its baby steps in attempting to emulate the opposition strategy of exposing scandals, albeit with some hiccups.

"The disclosure and exposure of scandals are better, and even better than policy debates," he said.

Similarly, Khoo said BN has begun to do its job in states where it is the opposition.

"It's good because in these states they have a role to play. If their allegations are proven true then Pakatan must definitely do something about it.

"Pakatan (members) are no angels. The political culture (of corrupt practices) still exists," he added.