

PM, time to sack your 'propaganda chief'
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I refer to the malaysiakini report BBC blasted for interviews with 'rejected leaders'.

Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin needs to go back to school and re-educate himself about the true meaning of democracy and about the fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression, which, by the way, is also a right guaranteed by the Federal Constitution.

He embarrassed Malaysia when he in the media "... criticised the British broadcaster (BBC) for giving air time to opposition leaders he said had been 'rejected' by voters' - a veiled reference to ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim".

In a true democracy, every person has the freedom of expression, and the media, be it local or otherwise, must not only have the freedom to publish these comments and views but also has the duty and obligation to do so. This is an obligation and duty owed by the mass media to the general public, especially the citizenry, and that is to publish the differing opinions and views held by persons and groups.

It was rather stupid for the minister to even suggest that if one loses in an election, then the media must 'black out' comments and viewpoints of such people. We have general elections once every five years, and the people have the right to vote in the representatives of their own choice. To suppress the voices of others, save the elected representatives and members of the government, is definitely undemocratic and a gross violation of rights.

To suppress opposing views and opinions definitely deprives the 'rakyat' of the right to know before they choose the persons or parties they want to represent them.

It must also not be forgotten that parties and candidates that lose in Malaysian elections sometimes do secure a large number of votes cast, sometimes even more than 40 percent of the votes cast. The only reason they did not win was because they did not secure sufficient votes, hence they can never be said to be persons totally 'rejected' by voters. Come the next elections, they may manage to win the seat they contest for.

The information minister, as reported, also went further to threaten that the airing of expression and comments by some of these 'rejected personalities' by the BBC may '...undermine bilateral relations between Malaysia and Britain...'

Such 'threats' by a Malaysian minister is an embarrassment and more so when it comes from an 'information minister' whose function must and should be to ensure that the people get all the information available be it good or bad. As a minister, he must realise that he serves the people – and not his political party. Zainuddin Maidin forgets that he is the Malaysian information minister – not the information minister of Umno and/or the Barisan Nasional.

Malaysia, which strives to be a 'first-class developed nation', must really move away from the practice of censorship, secrecy, controlled media and the suppression of freedom of speech, expression and assembly. We must strive to become a real democracy where transparency, accountability and the freedom of expression are fundamental elements.

Just having general elections once every five years does not make Malaysia a real democracy.

We really need a Freedom of Information Act, and the Official Secrets Act and all other acts that impede real freedom and fundamental rights must forthwith be repealed.

We hope that our prime minister will do something that would remedy the situation and restore the public's perception that Malaysia is truly a democratic nation which respects freedom of expression and advocates the freedom of the media. He should, I believe, at the very least sanction the Malaysian information minister and ask him to publicly recant his statements as reported.

Maybe, we may also need a new information minister, who understands and respects the right to freedom of speech, expression and the media.

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