

Bovine head judgement symptomatic of broken system
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Wear a black T-shirt in Malaysia and you could be arrested for being a dissident. Hold a candle light vigil calling for freedom of expression and you could get doused with chemical water, followed by hundreds of baton-wielding anti-riot police beating the hell out of you.

Turn up to show solidarity with Teoh Beng Hock's family and demand justice for the former political aide of a fellow colleague who was found dead following an interrogation by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and you could be detained for illegal assembly.

Hold a rally on the streets for free and fair elections, against price hikes which would adversely affect the poor and demand the abolishing of the Internal Security Act (ISA) and you could end up being detained under the draconian law, to disappear indefinitely as it allows for detention without trial.

But four men who paraded with a bloodied cow head, stomped on it and pleaded guilty to doing so with the intent to incite racial tension had the sedition charges against them dropped. Instead they were fined a mere RM3,000 and sentenced to one week jail.

A group of 50 Muslims spat and kicked on the severed head of the cow, considered a sacred animal by the Hindus, to protest the relocation of a 150-year-old temple to their neighborhood in August last year.

We are not against the protest as Pakatan Rakyat believes in the freedom of expression and assembly as enshrined in the federal constitution. But when charges are dropped after the accused persons admit to the fact that their acts were aimed at inciting racial tension, then something is clearly wrong with the judicial system.

The judge hopes that the verdict would serve as a deterrent. However, the light sentence would only further strain race relations in the country.

The cow-head protest drew a nationwide outcry, prompting 98 police reports to be lodged across the country. In response, the protesters ran to Home Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, who glossed over the seriousness of the issue and an Umno leader was quick to say that the police did not clamp down on the protest due to the small turnout.

When the smoke cleared, it teased out dangerous political elements at play. The savage act was planned and executed not just overthrow the opposition-led Selangor state government but also to create a climate of fear and divert the peoples' attention from real issues on the ground.

In short, it was the shameful but potent mix of religion and politics to stay in power and expand the power base.

The court's verdict only goes to show that the opposition's initial candor was spot on. But its about time that the Umno-led government understands that playing this dangerous game could quickly parlay into a racial riot which would further split the society.

The spate of attacks against churches, a Sikh temple and a mosque early this year clearly indicate the declining state of race relations in Malaysia.

The government and Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, instead, should seriously look into measures to safeguard the country's economy which is slipping fast. We are faced with the possibility of a double-dip recession following the credit crunch in Europe. And the European impact would eventually hit Malaysia too. The 2009 foreign direct investment catastrophic fall should be a wake-up call.

The people are deeply unhappy with the recent price hike exercise by the government as this would have a severe impact on the poor.

Filibustering on weeding out rampant corruption and efforts at accountability and instead focusing on devious tactics to stay in power would certainly spell doom for the country.

Clearly it is now Najib's call.

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