

Don't take freedom for granted
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A lot has changed in 53 years but Malaysians now face their hardest struggle of all: the fight to defend civil liberties.

We collaborated with the communists in the Malayan jungles, to fight the Japanese. Later, the Internal Security Act (ISA) was formulated to fight the communist insurgency after independence from Britain. Ironically, the ISA is now used to fight loyal citizens.

Malaysia may seem like a tropical paradise, but human rights abuses are common. We don't have freedom of speech, nor freedom of assembly. Ask any foreigner about Malaysia, and he will describe the beaches, the adventure holidays, its lovely girls, its people and the food.

anti isa vigil pj 010810 06On the 50th anniversary of the ISA on Aug 1, Malaysian police arrested 38 people who took part in peaceful candlelight vigils throughout the country.

In London, a group of Malaysians held a similar anti-ISA gathering opposite the Malaysian Tourism Office in Trafalgar Square. They distributed pamphlets, answered queries, read poetry, sang songs and enacted a short play, to portray the brutality of the ISA.

Some Malaysians in Australia held a simultaneous gathering. This mark of solidarity will increase international awareness.

The London protest was genial but solemn. There were no policemen beating riot shields, no loud-hailers barking orders, and no arrests. The British policemen who passed the protestors simply smiled and continued on their beat.

The news of police brutality and arrests in Malaysia filtered via Twitter and caused concern among the London group. They started to chant slogans: Shame on you Malaysian government. Shame on you Najib. Stop detention without trial. Free all detainees now. What do we want? Human rights. When do we want it? Now. Yes to tourism, No to torture. Down, down with the ISA.

NONETheir numbers swelled when Malaysian tourists and English locals joined in. A candle was lit at 2pm to synchronise with the Malaysian protests. A minute's silence for the sacrifices and suffering of all the ISA detainees, past and present, was observed.

To add to the gravitas of the event, the sun hid behind the clouds, reflecting the sombre mood. Nelson, looking down from his column, didn't turn a blind eye to the protest.

Over the years, the ISA has been used to detain over 10,000 people who are subjected to abuse, torture, solitary confinement and the denial of legal access.

Isn't Malaysia a police state and the ISA its weapon? Intimidation and harassment add to the climate of fear.

Last week, Harrison Ngau, a human rights lawyer was briefly detained at Kuching airport He was allegedly accused of masterminding the protests in Oxford against Sarawak Chief Minister Taib Mahmud. He denies any involvement. The police revealed they were "under orders from the top" and that Harrison is "on their watch-list".

Subjugated society

Many Malaysians living abroad are concerned about the injustices in their country but those in Malaysia seem oblivious to what's happening.

Overseas Malaysians feel the economic, social and political issues when they return for a visit. The sense of helplessness of Malaysians at home is best summed up by one person's comment, "Aiya, this is Malaysia, what can we do?"

This is a defeatist attitude for there is much to do. Nevertheless, overseas Malaysians are in a privileged position to act without fear, unlike those in Malaysia.

NONERecently, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin (left) told foreigners to respect Malaysian law. He was referring to former US vice-president Al Gore and deputy defence secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who were appealing to the Obama administration to intervene in Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy trial.

The DPM said that "interference was a futile exercise" and that it was "inappropriate as Malaysia practised democracy and had its own laws and well-managed legal system".

We beg to differ.

The government pays lip service to democracy. The laws are interpreted to serve the few at the top. Its legal system is paralysed. Its police force are its rottweilers.

Malaysians, including Malays, are emigrating. Overseas students are not close-minded but they are scared. They practise self-censorship and do not attend political talks lest their scholarships are withdrawn.

Beach CrowdThe world must be made aware, that Malaysia is not just golden beaches and great food. There is fear and a subjugated society.

We were once a highly successful nation - a multicultural paradise, a peaceful country with a booming economy. International observers still see this image. Moreover, many educated people - professionals, middle-class people - are in apathy.

Every little bit should help to highlight Malaysia's human rights abuses. The London ISA effort is putting the government under scrutiny. Links with UK-based human rights organisations add to the government's discomfort.

Foreign media coverage is abysmally low. Maybe, international coverage will increase once Malaysia becomes a failed state, ruled by fundamentalists.

If Robert de Niro was persuaded to be Malaysia's 'personal' emissary, perhaps other celebrities, sympathetic to human rights causes, could be enlisted.

Sting highlighted the plight of a remote tribe in Brazil. Richard Gere promoted peace in the name of Buddhism. Gordon Ramsay now promotes Malaysian food. His speech is coloured with expletives but he may be shocked to find that in Malaysia, words that have nothing to do with profanity are banned.

Abuse of ISA

Fifty-three years ago, our forefathers spoke up against colonialism. Now it is our turn to speak up against tyranny. The momentum has begun and everyone has a role.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has promised to review the ISA. He must be made to honour that pledge and abolish the ISA.

NONEThe UN and other international organisations should continue to exert pressure on Malaysia. Ultimately, the impetus to abolish the ISA can only come from the rakyat.

For those who feel that talking, and writing is insufficient, I ask, 'What would you suggest? Take up arms? It will provide fodder for the authorities to maintain the ISA and convince the ISA sympathisers that this draconian act is necessary.'

Your vote, your voice and your presence are important.

The ISA is a politically expedient tool which is used to protect the interests, excesses and wrongdoings of BN. In today's context, it has little to do with national security.

The ISA was once used to protect people from communism. Today, it is used to protect the government from its own people.

MARIAM MOKHTAR is a non-conformist traditionalist from Perak, a bucket chemist and an armchair eco-warrior. In 'real-speak', this translates into that she comes from Ipoh, values change but respects culture, is a petroleum chemist and also an environmental pollution-control scientist.

She expresses gratitude to the many people who helped produce this article with photos and personal comments. Names have been withheld to protect their identities. The organisers of the ISA London group wish to say the protest will be held every month and that everyone is welcome.

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