

Malaysia's uneasy dance with the Web
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On July 31, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who is rapidly becoming the stormy petrel of Malaysian politics, made a tough, uncompromising speech to the annual Malaysian Student leaders Summit in Kuala Lumpur.

The 72-year-old Razaleigh, an elder statesman of Umno, called for the abolition Malaysia's Internal Security Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Printing and Publication Act as well as the Universities and Colleges Act, which circumscribes the freedom of expression of students and professors and which, Razaleigh said, "has done immense harm in dumbing down our universities."

It was a major speech on an important occasion to Malaysia's future leaders. Other speakers included members of the judiciary, presidents of bar councils and many others.

tengku razaleigh speech 110310 02"Billions have been looted from this country, and billions more are being siphoned out as our entire political structure crumbles. Yet we are gathered here in comfort, in a country that still seems to 'work': Most of the time," Razaleigh said (right). "This is due less to good management than to the extraordinary wealth of this country. You were born into a country of immense resources, both natural, cultural and social.

"We have been wearing down this advantage with mismanagement and corruption. With lies, tall tales and theft. We have a political class unwilling or unable to address the central issue of the day because they have grown fat and comfortable with a system built on lies and theft."

Razaleigh's speech, controversial as it was, was not mentioned anywhere in the nation's mainstream press, despite the fact that among other things, he said that "over the last 25 years, much of the immense wealth generated by our productive people and our vast resources has been looted."

Nervy time for establishment media

Despite the fact that no newspapers printed any of the speech, Rejal Arbi, the former editor of the Malay language Berita Harian who is now columnist, thought it merited exposure. However, Mior Kamarulbaid, the editor of the paper, thought otherwise. He spiked Rejal's column.

Berita Harian is owned by Umno, which is increasingly unsettled by Razaleigh's calls to clean out the endemic corruption in the party.

Likewise, The Star, which is owned by the MCA, the second-biggest component of the Barisan Nasional, the ruling national coalition, didn't carry Razaleigh's remarks, nor did the New Straits Times, which is also owned by Umno. Nor was it carried in the party-owned television stations.

However, it was carried widely on Internet news sites, including being streamed on the

independent Malaysiakini television. It was carried verbatim on the Internet-based news portal Malaysian Insider, among other Internet sites.

This has assumed increasing importance because of an Aug. 16 report in the independent Internet news site Malaysian Insider that the administration of Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak is evaluating the feasibility of putting an Internet filter in place to block so-called "undesirable websites."

According to the report, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission commissioned the Malaysian arm of KPMG, the accounting and advisory firm, to carry out a "'Study on Positive and Safe Use of the Internet' in early August to evaluate, among others, "the implementation of Internet Filter at Internet Gateway level" and "the impact of the various methods to Malaysian Internet users and Malaysia economy."

A year ago, the government backed away from a similar plan for a filter to block websites it considered undesirable. After the story became public, Najib denied there was any plan to police the Internet.

Although the rationale cited for such a filter is usually to keep pornography away from the nation's youth, it can be used to block undesirable political comment as well.

In Thailand today, for instance, at least 13,000 websites have been blocked by the government, ostensibly to block unfavorable comment about the country's monarchy. But in fact, it is being used extensively to block political comment as well.

It isn't clear what the KPMG study will be used for by the government. But when Internet journalism was just getting started in the late stages of the reign of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the government took a decision not to place the same kinds of controls on websites that it maintains for the print media, which are onerous indeed.

Zippering up the opposition

NONEThe Printing and Presses Act, passed in 1984, has been used repeatedly against such publications as The Rocket, the vehicle of the opposition DAP, and others. Human Rights Watch reported from New York in July that "the government has effectively suspended indefinitely publication of Suara Keadilan, the paper of the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat" and severely circumscribed the circulation of Harakah, published by the opposition ,PAS.

As a result of the fact that political parties control the mainstream media, the Internet in Malaysia has come alive, not just with opposition blogs and comment about the government, but with some solid and some not so solid - journalism.

BNONEut backing away from total Internet freedom today is a difficult thing for any government to do and would generate considerable embarrassment, if not public outrage.

In Malaysia, the Internet is broadly regarded as having played a major role in 2008 national elections that cost the Barisan Nasional its two-thirds majority in the parliament for the first time in the over 50-year history of the country and delivered several states into the

hands of the opposition.

More lately, the Internet has carried extensive and embarrassing reports by The Sarawak Report, a Sarawak-based NGO, of the astonishing international holdings of the chief minister, Abdul Taib Mahmud, in Canada, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, which the NGO claims were built on the ravaging of Sarawak's vast natural resources, particularly timber. Not a word of Taib's holdings has been carried in Malaysia's press.

"We must have freedom as guaranteed under our Constitution," Razaleigh told the student leaders. "Freedom to assemble, associate, speak, write, move. This is basic. Even on matters of race and even on religious matters we should be able to speak freely, and we shall educate each other."

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