



**Muhyiddin 'berubah' kerana kerusi no 1
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COMMENT As Malaysia gears up for what is expected to be a crucial general election in 2011, the government is tightening up against widely popular political cartoons and blogs that the ruling party fears will translate into voters' support for the opposition.

Satire is the new weapon of choice in the fight against government control over freedom of expression. Creative critics invite citizens to laugh at authority and comment on issues, using cartoons, blogs, and video clips uploaded on *YouTube*.

Ironically, satire is allowed under Malaysia's Internet laws. The Communications and Multimedia Act bars contents that are false but allows satire and parody "where it is clear to an ordinary user that the content is fiction".

But, despite the legal protection, police action has been swift.

On Sept 2, Irwan Abdul Rahman (*right*), executive editor of the *Malay Mail* daily, was charged with publishing falsehoods after lampooning the country's biggest power producer Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) in a clearly tongue-in-cheek Internet posting entitled "TNB to sue WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) over earth hour".

A week later, a blogger called 'Namewee', who has close to a million followers on popular Internet websites *YouTube* and *Facebook*, was arrested and is expected to be charged with sedition for allegedly questioning special privileges enjoyed by native Malays, or bumiputra, who make up about 65 percent of Malaysia's 28 million population.

Malaysia's minority groups decry the ruling United Malays National Organisation (Umno) party for its decades-old policy of giving the bumiputra privileges including land ownership, and access to business licences and scholarships.

Signs of desperation?

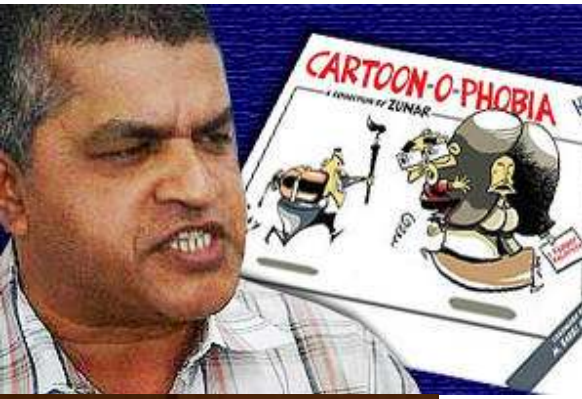
Some see the tough measures against political satire as signs of desperation among the ruling political elite within Umno, which fears it could be losing its grip on power.

Umno president and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is under attack from within his party for being "too liberal" with political opponents, especially the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance) coalition.

At the same time, the right-wing Malay group Perkasa is criticising Najib for conceding to minority group demands for political equality with native Malays.

Amid these pressures, Najib is trying to revive Malaysia's struggling economy in time for elections expected in 2011 but only due in 2013.

The last election in 2008 saw the Umno-led Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition lose power over five state governments to the Pakatan coalition. More significantly, Pakatan's



headway at the polls meant that the ruling coalition was denied - for the first time since the country's independence in

1957 - a two-thirds majority in Parliament.

"It is clear the ruling elite is shaken and finds satire intolerable because it damages their image and gives the public an opportunity to laugh at them," said lawmaker M Kulasegaran. "Satire is a powerful weapon for change and democratisation," he added.

In the most recent action against satirical criticism, prominent cartoonist Zulkiflee Anwar Ulhaque, known by his pen name 'Zunar', was arrested and jailed for a day - just hours before the launch of his latest book, aptly titled *Cartoon-o-phobia*, on Sept 24.

Authorities have called Zunar's cartoons "detrimental to public order", and the cartoonist is likely to be prosecuted under the Sedition Act of 1948.

"They can imprison me, but cannot imprison my mind," Zunar said in a text message to his wife, Fazlina Rosley. Police action "will not hinder my efforts to expose corruption and abuse of power," Zunar said. "The arrest and banning of the book only shows that the government fears cartoons," he added.

Police also ransacked the office of *Malaysiakini*, an alternative news website that publishes Zunar's cartoons, in a move that its editor-in-chief Steven Gan said is clearly an attempt to intimidate the online publication and its employees.

"We will continue to publish cartoons by Zunar," Gan told *IPS*.

'Atmosphere of terror'

Lawyers, journalist and activists held a press conference on Sept 26 to show their support for Zunar.

"We send a clear message to the government that the public will not accept nor tolerate such draconian dictates like the arrest and harassment of cartoonists and others," said political commentator Josh Hong (*right in pic*). "Such action creates an atmosphere of terror."

"This level of tough action is unprecedented," said Bar Council president Ragunath Kesavan. "If the intention is to silence Zunar and others and make examples of them to cow the population, then it is definitely not working."

"In fact people are shocked by the action against satirists. Officials should just laugh and not see satire as criminal offences," Kesavan said.

Helen Ang, a researcher with the Centre for Policy Initiatives who was herself investigated



under the Sedition Act, described the police action as a "systematic harassment" of people who voice their honest opinions. "This has got to stop," Ang said.

"It reflects and shows poorly on the authorities that they are absolutely paranoid," former Bar Council president Ambiga Sreenevasan said of Zunar's arrest. "The action is outrageous; he is a gifted artist and tells it just as it is."

- IPS

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