

But Pak Lah said demos 'not our culture'...
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I refer to the Malaysiakini
MCPX report Umno holds one-hour protest at Komtar.

Looks like public demonstrations are part of our culture after all. It was only a few months ago after the Bersih and Hindraf rallies that we saw the prime minister employing a cultural relativist argument that demonstrations were not part of Malaysia culture. He said, 'This is not the way of Malaysia. Ours is democracy and this is not acceptable'.

He said the demonstration was not the way to bring change stating: 'I hope the people will understand that this wayside democracy is not the way to effect change' and that 'People are willing change in a peaceful way'. Last month at the Hindraf gathering he stated, 'Those who are out to create trouble do not respect our democracy process'.

Ironically, some 1,000 Umno members and supporters staged a one-hour protest outside the Penang state government office in Komtar on Friday afternoon over the New Economic Policy controversy. The organisers described the demonstration as a 'protest by Penang Malays against the state government's discrimination and marginalisation of the community'. I understand the gathering was peaceful and they dispersed after a while.

This clearly goes to show that in a democratic country that are various ways one can raise concerns, express displeasure at the state as well as influence policy makers. While the ballot box is one way, and it is clear that many Malaysian used that way on March 8, peaceful public demonstrations is an alternative that is used in many countries around the world including in many democratic countries in Asia.

In Malaysia, it has been used a by various groups such as students, farmers, workers and various other communities in various struggles for social justice and human rights. Unfortunately, over the years we have seen the state deploy the police and FRU to use excessive force to crackdown on these demonstrations in the name of 'stability' and 'public security'. The police have used Section 27 of the Police Act that allows for the police to declare public assemblies 'unlawful' and to arrest many Malaysia for just taking part in peaceful demonstrations.

I hope that now that the rakyat has spoken, we can move from a procedural democracy to a substantive democracy where freedom of expression and assembly that is protected in our federal constitution is guaranteed. The state must ensure that the police respect this right and end the arrests and excessive use of force by the FRU. I also hope that our parliamentarians work toward repealing Section 27 of the Police Act, which is an outdated and unnecessary law that undermines human rights.

It looks that the Umno demonstrations have exposed a major flaw in the prime minister's cultural relativist argument. It has shown that the right to assembly peacefully is a fundamental right for all Malaysians on whichever side you belong. In fact, it is a manifestation of a healthy democratic system where citizens have a right to express themselves without fear of state repression.

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