

Monarchs' 'resurgence' a welcome phenomenon
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The recent assertiveness by several state monarchs of their powers to appoint menteri besar and state executive councils is a welcome development that can serve to boost democracy in Malaysia, a forum was told yesterday. MCPX

As several events last year demonstrated, the rakyat "instinctively" turn towards the rulers when all other avenues to redress grievances are ignored by the government of the day, said the panelists who were speaking on the topic 'Interventionist Monarchs – A Complement or a Challenge to Democracy?'.
interventionist monarchs forum 020408 panelists

Far from being mere 'rubber stamps' for the government, rulers can and have been important as "opinion leaders".

They also have the potential to check the abuses of politicians, said the panelists at the forum, which was jointly organised at the Kuala Lumpur-Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (KLSCAH) by the KLSCAH human rights committee and human rights group Suaram.

Addressing an audience of about 150 people, Human Rights Society of Malaysia president Malik Imtiaz cited the recent episode where Terengganu Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin rejected Barisan Nasional's (BN) candidate Idris Jusoh for the post of menteri besar.

Despite Idris being the initial choice of BN chairperson Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and having the support of 22 BN state assemblypersons, Mizan appointed in his place Kijal state assemblyperson Ahmad Said.

Addressing rumours that Idris had displeased the sultan and many people in Terengganu over the awarding of contracts and the issue of oil royalties, Malik said the state constitution provides for the sultan to choose his menteri besar on the basis of his own 'subjective' criteria without having to obtain the agreement of other quarters.

Not a mere rubber stamp

"It's his view that matters. Without meaning any disrespect, if one day before the appointment the sultan has a dream and in that dream this person commands confidence, it's the sultan's prerogative... according to the language of that (state) constitution," said Malik.

"Because it is his judgment that matters, if he decides this is the person who commands confidence, that's the way it is," he added.

While some quarters have described Mizan's decision as amounting to 'interfering' in what should be regarded as the domain of politicians and public officials, Malik said such a stance assumes the sultans have no role to play other than as rubber stamps for the government of the day.

interventionist monarchs forum 020408 malik imtiaz
Malik also asked how a sultan is

expected to decide when faced with the prospect of appointing as menteri besar someone who has been implicated by allegations of corruption and mismanagement.

"Do we expect the sultan to say nothing about it or keep quiet about it and say, 'This doesn't effect my choice'?"

"When you put sultan in a collision course (with the government)... what else can one really expect other than the sultan doing what he considers to be the right thing? Are we saying that the sultan could not do what he thought was right in the situation?" he asked further.

"There's two choices we have when we try to understand the (sultan's) role in the state constitutions: it's either (as a) rubber stamp or a living person with a view of his own. I think the choice is quite clear.

"At the end of the day, if we expect the monarch to be mere rubber stamps, then why have the monarchs at all?" he added.

Empowerment of the monarchs

Among other speakers at the forum were PAS' research director Dr Dzulkifli Ahmad, who said the significance of the general election lies not only in the empowerment of the electorate.

"It is now about the empowerment of the monarchs. Suddenly they realised they have been marginalised like all of us," he said in reference to the many constitutional amendments during the tenure of ex-premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad to curtail the powers of the rulers.

"(Now) they are coming out to assume their role as rightful monarchs in whom many of us look upon as guardians of democracy against the wrongdoing of politicians," said Dzulkifli, who is Kuala Selangor state assemblyperson.

interventionist monarchs forum 020408 gobind singh deoDissenting from the stand of most of the panelists, DAP lawyer-turned-parliamentarian Gobind Singh Deo said the assertion of the sultans in the matter of state officials' appointments was a double-edged sword.

The episode raises the question as to whether it signified a step backward for the people and rule of law, he said. To address this possibility, state constitutional laws pertaining to such appointments need to be clarified as to the rulers' actual powers and limitations.

This would not only ensure the smooth running of the government machinery after elections, but go far to protect democracy, said the Puchong Member of Paliament.