

**A spirit of intolerance**  
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Certain events which have occurred over the last few weeks point to an apparent spirit of intolerance sweeping over our nation. Instead of rivals coming together for the common good, each side of the debate seems to be hardening its respective position. Confrontational lines in the sand have been drawn, which cannot be crossed on the pretext of defending principles. I offer five events by way of commentary.

MCPX

lee kah choonThe first event is of course the brouhaha over the appointment of Lee Kah Choon, previously of Gerakan, to two investment-related positions in Penang. His acceptance of these positions runs counter to "the spirit of Barisan Nasional", according to one press report. It is to be gathered that this spirit prohibits BN component parties, and their members, from co-operating with political parties which constitute the federal opposition. It is the same spirit that cost Shahrir Samad his position as chairman of the BN backbenchers club when he supported an opposition motion in the Dewan Rakyat.

We all know that, after the results of the general election on March 8, Shahrir was brought into the Cabinet, ostensibly to make the Cabinet more inclusive of non-mainstream voices. This zaid ibrahimaccounts for the inclusion of Senator Zaid Ibrahim in the Cabinet as well. But what is sauce for the goose is clearly not sauce for the gander. The situation reminded me of when (then) Lee Lam Thye stood down as the DAP MP for Kuala Lumpur Bandar and was suddenly appointed to several government boards and committees. Cross-overs are allowed, it would seem, so long as they go only in one direction. Hence the BN's stony silence over the numerous times they have benefitted from elected representatives belonging to other political parties switching sides, even as they complain how any possible cross-over to Pakatan Rakyat would be unconscionable, unethical and a fraud on the electorate.

Surely the real fraud on the electorate is to misunderstand the message that the Rakyat sent to politicians of all persuasions on March 8. Which is that we have had enough of arrogant politicians and political chauvinism. Politicians need to work for the ultimate benefit of the Rakyat, and the Rakyat's best interests are not served by selfish and self-serving partisanship. Malaysia has now more fully embraced (for how long is uncertain) a spirit of political pluralism, and politicians must get used to the idea that we can have, indeed should have, a sharing and spreading out of political control at different levels of government. It is a hallmark of political immaturity that members of village development and security committees and city councils alike are resigning en bloc, and that BN political appointees in states which were lost to Pakatan Rakyat are being told not to accept reappointment. Offers of appointment by Pakatan Rakyat have gone unanswered, denying the Rakyat the fruits of bipartisan co-operation.

**Olympic torch incident**

The second event is yet another press report, not denied thus far, stating that three people were arrested during the recently-held Olympic torch relay in Kuala Lumpur. What caught my attention was the apparent offence by two of these persons, a Japanese couple, namely the wearing of pro-Tibet t-shirts. Are we returning to our bad habits? Have we suddenly

become so intolerant of dissent (or is it a fear of incurring the wrath of the Chinese government) that the mere wearing of pro-Tibet t-shirts can now get you arrested by the Malaysian police? Once again, are the authorities clamping down on the freedom of expression? Are we once again so fearful of minority voices that they must be so powerfully squelched?

The third event was the announcement of a new chairman and deputy chairman of the Barisan Nasional's backbenchers club. It should be recalled that in 2004 one of the manifesto promises of the Barisan Nasional was to strengthen the role of Parliament. To this end the backbenchers club even went to the extent of appointing a leading local law academic as a consultant to advise them on reforming and empowering Parliament in the face of the executive branch's dominance. However we saw little of that reform and empowerment in the last Parliament.

This should now be the next thing on the prime minister's "to do" list from his many carried-over promises. In a genuine show of decentralising control and empowering parliament, the government should immediately announce the setting up of parliamentary permanent committees to provide legislative oversight of each ministry of government. Each parliamentary permanent committee should comprise members from both sides of the aisle. They should be able to quiz ministers, civil servants and others. They should be able to hold hearings and hear witnesses. Additionally, the parliamentary permanent committee on finance (a.k.a. the public accounts committee) should be headed by the opposition in time-honoured fashion. This would truly give meaning to the government's stated objective of greater transparency and accountability. Anything less would only confirm that the government is intolerant of openness.

The fourth event is the asking of parliamentary questions. This is a primary means of holding government to account. Whilst it may be true that some MPs have failed to give notice of questions to be asked in Parliament, the greater and more important question has yet to be raised, and it is this: why does the prime minister not come to the Dewan Rakyat to answer questions? In the UK, for example, Prime Minister's Question Time occurs twice a week. Unless he is away overseas, the prime minister himself attends the House of Commons and has to answer questions put to him. It is a highlight of parliamentary sittings. It is where the cut and thrust of parliamentary debates take place. The first question is normally given to the leader of the opposition. This practice occurs in most countries which have adopted the Westminster style of parliamentary government. And yet it is missing in Malaysia.

If government is to be accountable to the Rakyat, it must begin with the chief executive, namely the prime minister. All those years of "kepimpinan melalui teladan" must have sunk in by now. The government should immediately institute Prime Minister's Question Time beginning next week, when Parliament begins its session. If the prime minister is not to be viewed as intolerant of those who would question him or his government's policies, he should seize this opportunity. The Rakyat will appreciate him for this.

## **Repeal ISA**

isa internal security act vigil 050108The fifth and final event of this commentary has yet to happen. It will occur next week when the Leader of KDU/M Seri Paduka Baginda Yang di-Pertuan Agong's Most Loyal Opposition introduces a motion in the Dewan Rakyat to repeal the Internal Security Act 1960 ("ISA") and to call for the release of all ISA detainees. Indeed the call should be to repeal all legislation that permits detention without trial. The

spirit of intolerance will prevail if MPs belonging to certain component parties of the BN, which are on record as opposing the ISA, nonetheless vote against the motion or conveniently absent themselves when a vote is taken.

No doubt BN will crack the parliamentary whip. But this is now a question of integrity. Will component political parties that are officially against the ISA (as they have declared to the Rakyat) nonetheless honour their stated position, defy the whip and support the motion? Will these parties stand up to defend what they have told the Rakyat they stand for? This remains to be seen.

Once again we teeter on the brink. What spirit will guide us in the weeks and months ahead? Will it be a spirit of intolerance, or one that welcomes openness, diversity and plurality?

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