

**Merdeka 2009: A nation divided**  
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would like to share with you the images that come to my mind when I think of Merdeka Day. I have flashes of police violence against peaceful protesters, deep lacerations on Kugan Anathan's body after spending three days in prison for alleged car theft and photos of Teoh Beng Hock on the roof of a building that houses the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).

I get glimpses of the letter which claims that top officers of the anti-graft body are in cahoots with a former politician to topple the Pakatan Rakyat-led Selangor government, former Selangor Menteri Besar Khir Toyo's mansions, the violation of the rights of the Penan, the Pahang Syariah Court's verdict to cane a Muslim mother of two for drinking beer and a group of Muslims parading a bloodied cow head to protest the building of a Hindu temple in their neighbourhood and the nation's largest financial scandal - the RM12 billion PKFZ fiasco.

To be brutally frank, that is not the end of the list.

We have a prime minister who is hell bent on staying on in power at whatever cost. PM Najib Abdul Razak has clearly shown that he would choreograph a wanton toppling of a state government to score brownie points from ruling Umno members. This resulted in Perakians being robbed off a democratically-elected leadership.

Opposition politicians in the state of Selangor are his next target. Allegations that state representatives misused their funds are fashioned to allow anti-corruption officers to nab and interrogate cabinet members and their aides.

Teoh was found dead after one such questioning process. State medical examiners said it was suicide while the anti-graft officers are playing innocent at the inquest hearing. And the police are yet to investigate reports lodged regarding a letter, written by disillusioned MACC officers, saying that their top bosses are taking instructions from a former politician to topple the Selangor government.

The police use chemical-laced water and tear gas to disperse peaceful protestors, including women and children, who are merely exercising their freedom of expression and assembly as enshrined in the country's federal constitution. But they are branded as enemies of the state for holding candles at a vigil and wearing black T-shirts.

However, the police watched silently when a group of Muslims paraded a chopped cow head to protest against the building of a Hindu temple in their area. The excuse given by Selangor police chief Khalid Abu Bakar is that the officer at the rally was a junior staff who did not know his job. This is a joke.

It is clear that the cow head rally, as it is now dubbed, was carefully planned and executed to create fear among the masses and primarily get the Malays to rally behind ruling Umno, which lost its power base at last year's general election.

The 1969 bloody racial riots, Operasi Lalang in 1988 and the racial clash in 2001 all happened when Umno's grip on power was violently shaken as it is now.

Najib, however, still fakes a penchant for democracy, diplomacy and justice while stifling political freedom for fear of losing his ability to monopolise power in the country. In conclusion, the premier's goodwill extends only so far that his interests are safeguarded.

### **Little reason to rejoice**

The continued suppression and violation of aborigines' rights, control of the media, attempts to silence and clamp down on alternative media and bloggers, prevalent use of preventive laws to keep a lid on dissent and rampant corruption clearly shows how little Najib cares about lending substance to his new campaign, 1Malaysia.

The campaign zeroes in on national integration through equality to all races. But the ground reality brings us face to face with marginalised minorities who continue to be discriminated upon, urban pioneers who are struggling to make ends meet, a sliding economy, rising racial tension and corruption that continues to line the wallets of the ruling elite and their cronies.

In short, Malaysia is a nation that is divided as never before.

Despite this, the Umno-led Barisan Nasional government is gearing up for Merdeka Day celebrations with a dizzyingly complex ensemble of dance, music and parades. I am at a loss and still searching for the reasons to celebrate August 31.

Before the nation and I can rejoice in the Merdeka festivities, Najib must implement effective reforms to restore the independence of government institutions. He must state his willingness to rebuild the country's financial system and be committed to wiping out graft.

Umno must stop fanning racial sentiments for its own political gains while equality to all races should not be mere rhetoric. Affirmative action policies must benefit the poor irrespective of race and religion.

Police violence and arbitrary arrests must be discontinued and the media must be allowed to work independently, without the interference of the executive.

If Najib could pledge the above, then Malaysians could celebrate Merdeka Day with the hope for a better future. But for now, it remains a Black Merdeka.