

Najib's 'People First' Slogan Means Right To Peaceful Assembly & Expression?
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Sometimes it suffices to say that the Malaysian government wants to organize the Malaysian body politic in a manner that it serves the interests of the ruling elite and their cronies. But it's this same ambition or rather greed which triggered massive protests across Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

Now, why am I saying this?

In Malaysia, we have an array of preventive laws including the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without trial, to silence dissidents.

Media organizations have to toe editorial lines blatantly dictated by UMNO leaders. Any journalist who dares to push the boundaries faces the sack or is subjected to internal investigations.

We are said to be a democratic nation but clearly with reservations. For example, the police could use violence to break up peaceful rallies as more than four people constitute an illegal assembly. Furthermore, they enjoy absolute power or we would not have mounting cases of trigger happy by the force or deaths in police custody.

Clearly, government institutions and preventive laws are used to keep the society under the grips of the ruling elite. No one is allowed to question them and those who were brave enough to do would be severely disciplined.

Precisely for these reasons do we need a clean electoral system which enables the rakyat to exercise their voting rights to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the government and make durable changes.

Free and fair elections are the fundamental aspects of a vibrant democracy. The people are entitled to vote in a system which is based on integrity as opposed to one open to abuses, including vote buying, gerrymandering, vote rigging and phantom voting.

The recent elections in Sarawak caricatured rampant vote buying, particularly in rural and poor areas.

In short, there must be no manipulation from the ruling government to ensure their longevity in politics. And election results must tally with the will of the people. In Malaysia, this is hardly the case.

With this in mind, I pledge my support for Bersih 2.0, a coalition of 62 non-governmental organizations which focuses on meaningful electoral reforms to ensure that peoples' voting rights are not marred by unscrupulous politicians and an unequal system.

Bersih has lobbied the Election Commission to reform postal voting, use indelible ink, clean up the electoral roll, allow all parties access to the media and introduce a minimum 21-day campaign period.

The commission has strongly resisted any idea for reforms. In fact, recent media reports indicate that they have closed the doors to Bersih 2.0 permanently.

Complaints lodged against vote buying during the Sarawak state elections were also dismissed in a nonchalant fashion.

This entrenches the public notion that government institutions are structured in a way to back the rich and powerful and ensure they are able to maintain their dominant position in society.

Weeks before the scheduled protest on July 9, we have seen responses from UMNO Youth and Perkasa leader, Ibrahim Ali, who doesn't miss any opportunity for self-promotion.

Both organizations have condemned the Bersih rally and planned simultaneous protests to pledge loyalty to the existing electoral process.

We welcome their rallies as freedom of assembly and expression form the crux of any democratic nation.

What we denounce are the lies they go on spreading about Bersih 2.0. The propaganda is cleverly tailored to tarnish the credible effort by the coalition. It's about time that UMNO and Perkasa understand that criticizing government policies does not, mind you, in any way project disloyalty to the country.

The deputy prime minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, has gone on a verbal tirade to allege that the Bersih 2.0 rally is an attempt to topple the government. Information, Communications and Culture minister Rais Yatim has expressed belief that the recent attacks on local and government websites were inadvertently linked to the planned rally.

These are false and unproven allegations aimed at confusing the public.

Thousands took to the streets in 2007 to call for electoral reforms. Tens of thousands would, again, brave water cannons and the anti-riot police to show their displeasure at a repressive regime.

We have heard the police speak - they have warned protestors and threatened organizers of pre-emptive arrests. I see this as an expression of fear from the ruling government.

Let's hope that the police would not work on these threats, which are nothing but bully-boy tactics to silence valid dissent in the country. It's shameless behavior to go to the mat on behalf of the government.

Instead of using force to clamp down on the organizers and protestors, the government must listen to the aspirations of the people. After all, that is what prime minister Najib Tun Razak repeats like a mantra. His "People First" slogan would become even more meaningless if the citizens get clubbed by the police for a peaceful assembly.

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