

Najib Does A Houdini On Democracy
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I would not celebrate. Not just yet. Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak's announcement to repeal the Internal Security Act (ISA) is welcomed. But I would have been happier if it came with no catch.

Whichever way I look at the announcement, it is clearly a victory for the people - the thousands who took to the streets demanding that ISA be repealed, the detainees who fought for the archaic law to be abolished as it strips people off dignity and the human rights activists who worked tirelessly, denouncing the Act.

But Najib is replacing ISA with two new laws. We are unsure of the ambit of these laws and it's unclear if it would still make provisions for arbitrary arrests.

Whatever little we know now is enough to make me look at Najib's "greater democracy" speech with suspicion. And especially as the government is tinkering with the idea of bringing in an Anti-Terrorism Act which would mirror the US Patriot Act.

In the US, this Act dramatically reduced restrictions on law enforcement agencies to search financial, business, medical and telephone records, expanded the powers of these agencies, gave the immigration wide discretion to detain and deport immigrants suspected of terrorism-related activities and conduct surveillance on individuals suspected of terrorist-related activities even though they are not linked to terrorist groups.

In short anyone and everyone suspected to be linked to terrorist organizations could be nabbed, humiliated, subjected to long-hours of interrogation and charged at the prerogative of the government. And all because terrorism is a sexy word and one that is used to bulldoze through a person's life.

Under the ISA, the Home Minister had the power to do just that. So where is the change, I am wondering.

And what media freedom exactly? As I look at it, the media organizations would still be under the watchful eye of UMNO and the Barisan Nasional government. Replacing a license which needs yearly renewal to a one-off permit that could be revoked if the media organizations did not dance to the tune of the government does not amount to further freedom for the media workers.

In fact, Najib made it even more difficult for the media organizations as there is no way to challenge the Home Minister's decision to revoke a publishing license. In essence, it means that papers and TV channels would have to shut down if they wrote or reported on issues which the government is not happy about.

The premier, to make my suspicion worse, did not raise crucial provisions under the Sedition Act or Official Secrets Act. Both these laws limit the freedom of media workers.

Najib has promised amendments to Police Act to grant greater freedom of assembly but warned against street demonstrations. And we still need to write in for permits for peaceful rallies.

However hard I try, it's incredibly difficult to give credit to Najib's so-called slew of reforms for a better Malaysia. These policy changes are his boldest announcement since he came to power. In his speech Najib also said that heading towards a bolder democracy was risky but crucial for his government to survive.

Therefore, it's obvious that Najib is making hasty decisions to bolster support for himself and UMNO ahead of the general election, which is widely expected to be held within the next six months.

Najib's popularity took a dip following the way he mishandled the Bersih 2.0 rally. From a high 72%

popularity rating in June 2010, the Merdeka Center survey showed a 59% support level recently.

Now Najib has a bigger headache to handle and it would be exciting to see how he pacifies the right-wing faction within his own political party, who were never happy with efforts to shake the status quo. Either that or the premier would, again, make a U-turn on these policy changes.

He was too weak to keep his promise of allowing Bersih 2.0 to use any stadium to hold a peaceful protest and unwilling to take on Perkasa for the rubbish dished out.

When I re-look at Najib's speech text, it becomes clearer that he has done a Houdini. Without the specifics, this is nothing but mere hot talk.

The devil is in the details. And UMNO cannot be trusted.

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