

Too Soon To Celebrate Najib's Half-Measure Political Reforms
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I welcome with caution the announcement made by Prime Minister Najib over his intention to repeal of the Internal Security Act (ISA) and three emergency declarations, and to do away with the requirement for annual printing licenses under the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) and to amend the Police Act to allow greater freedom of assembly. These repressive laws are an affront to human rights, rule of law, and they should not exist in a democracy in the first place.

However, the devil is in the details and it remains to be seen whether Najib actually has the political will and moral conviction to deliver what he announced given the authoritarian nature of the Barisan Nasional (BN) government all this while and the opposition that he will face from within UMNO itself.

Internal Security Act

Najib announced that two new laws will be drafted to safeguard national security against the threat of terrorism to take the place of the ISA which will be abolished. He did not describe the specifics of these new laws. History has shown that past amendments to the ISA have only made the ISA even more powerful and destructive to civil liberties. Thus, these two new laws could very well grant the government with even greater power than the existing ISA. As a former ISA detainee myself, I have experienced first-hand how the ISA can be used so arbitrarily based on false charges.

Printing Presses and Publications Act

I welcome Najib's proposal to replace the annually renewable yearly printing license with a one-time license. However, he did not elaborate on the details. It is unclear whether the Home Ministry will retain its absolute discretion to grant, deny or revoke any printing permit. If so, little will be changed from the current situation where editors and journalists are intimidated into biased reporting line for fear of losing their printing permit.

In addition, this single amendment alone does little to ensure freedom of press or freedom of information. Currently, all mainstream media in Malaysia are owned or controlled, either directly or indirectly, by Barisan Nasional. Even the state owned-TV channels and radio stations which are supposed to be independent are employed as BN's political tools. Thus, they are not independent and are biased in their news reporting. In the case of Utusan Malaysia and TV3, they remain immune from punishment by the government no matter how racist, seditious or dishonest their so-called news may be.

It is clear that the dominance of media ownership by BN component parties is unhealthy for Malaysia. It undermines democracy, undermines good governance and undermines integrity of a political system and the institutions of governance.

To even begin to prove his sincerity towards freedom of the press and freedom of information, Najib must put an end to BN's media dominance by lifting all restrictions upon political party organs such as Suara Keadilan, Harakah and Rocket. All party organs should be allowed to be freely distributed in the open market as any other publication. They should not be restricted to "members only" to allow information to be freely disseminated. As it is, opposition political parties face so many restrictions upon our activities by the Home Ministry and the police.

Police Act

With regards to Najib's promise to review restrictions on freedom of assembly contained in the Police Act, it is disappointing that Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein negated Najib with his statement, "strictly no street demonstrations." What a contradiction!

If Najib is sincere in living up to his announcement, the Police Act should be amended to respect the right

to freedom of assembly. There should not even be a need to apply for a police permit for gatherings as it is allowed by our Federal Constitution. It should be sufficient for the event organizer to give reasonable notice to the police of the date, venue, and agenda of the event. The police should not stand in its way so long as it will be carried out in a peaceful and orderly manner.

Conclusion

In short, it is too soon to celebrate on Najib's announcement as they are half-measures. Furthermore, the said proposals must be tabled, debated and passed in Parliament before they become law. Najib must produce more evidence of true political reform, and do so quickly. Otherwise, his claim to being a "Bapa Transformasi" will be a mockery of himself.

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