

## **The Queer World Of Malaysian Officialdom**

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The recent protests against Seksualiti Merdeka (SM) the movement which upholds the freedom for sexual orientation and gender identity was no surprise. These are just more protests orchestrated by Umno in the run-up to the general election.

The movement which was started in 2008 has never had any problems holding its annual festival until last Friday, when the government banned the planned SM celebration from taking place.

Was that a surprise? No.

Just before we go to the polls, anything that will appeal to the public, under the guise of race, religion or royalty, (the 3Rs) will be used by Umno, to try to gain support for BN.

The idea of banning the SM festival, is to win votes, nothing more, nothing less. It has little to do with stopping homosexuality, or the spread of what the Islamists or even the staunch Catholics term 'same sex' relationships', which both consider an anathema.

Umno's desire to appease a particular extremist and pseudo-religious section of the community is apparent. The authorities are so busy tripping over themselves trying to outdo one another that their actions appear contradictory and discriminatory.

The IGP Ismail Omar, said he was willing to meet the gay rights festival's organisers. However he also said that "several organisers had been identified and would be brought in to give statements this week."

We are told that former Bar Council president S. Ambiga, who had been invited by the SM organisers to attend the launch of its annual festival, was visited by policemen to record her statement.

Moreover, the police said the case was being investigated under Section 298A of the Penal Code and Section 27A(1)(c) of the Police Act.

Isn't this a clear case of harassment and intimidation?

Nonetheless, Deputy IGP, Khalid Abu Bakar said that the police were not denying SM their freedom of expression nor curtailing their human rights. He maintained that the police involvement was because the organisers lacked the necessary permits for holding the festival.

He also mentioned that the police had traced the link between Ambiga and the movement.

The SM movement which was hardly noticed in previous years, has gained prominence and notoriety, only because Ambiga is seen as the visible voice of democracy and as someone who champions the rights of the people.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's reputation worldwide suffered with his disastrous handling of

the Bersih 2.0 pro-democracy march led by Ambiga.

So, while the IGP and his deputy appear to be moderate mediators seemingly trying to "discuss public safety issues", the Federal Territories and Urban Well-Being Minister Raja Nong Chik Raja Zainal Abidin, was more belligerent.

He said that Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) would "take action against groups which organise functions linked to the SM programme".

The SM festival was scheduled to start on Tuesday and end on 13 November at Central Market's Annexe Gallery.

According to Raja Nong Chik, DBKL were within their rights to take action against the festival as it had been banned but he also confirmed that the public have never previously made any complaints about the festival.

He warned, "If it is carried out at a business premises, we can seal the premises. If it's held in public, we can take action against the organisers".

Many observers contend that these present complaints are orchestrated by Umno.

The protests against the SM march led by Malay groups have demanded that Ambiga be stripped of her citizenship. Some called her the "Anti-christ" and that "her 'wild' actions could cause chaos in the country".

The Malay Education Movement (Gagasan) secretary-general Syed Anuar Syed Mohamad told the Sunday edition of Utusan Malaysia that Ambiga was "not human" because she raised sensitive issues amongst the Muslims.

He said, "She should be punished accordingly, like banishment or any other severe sentence, to make her realise her mistake," and added that the Rulers could punish Ambiga for spreading morality issues which went against the religion.

"Although Malaysia is a democratic country, it does not mean Ambiga is given the freedom to do whatever she likes with her perverse ideology."

Ambiga has, however, maintained that she was not an organiser of the event and that she had been invited to launch the festival, in her personal capacity.

Marina Mahathir, the daughter of former Prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, was at a press conference to support Ambiga and the three human rights activists who were questioned by police over their involvement in the SM festival.

She was furious that TV3 had reported that the SM event was a "free sex festival" and warned a TV3 reporter, and the media pack, not to misquote her. She threatened to sue if the real purpose of the SM festival was not clarified.

The SM event is to help the marginalised lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community understand their legal rights.

Incidentally, Marina was the SM festival's guest of honour in 2009.

We don't hear calls from the Malay/Muslim groups to banish her; which only goes to show that this charade is another political ploy by Umno, to whip up public sentiment among the radical, intolerant Malays/Muslims and homophobes, to support BN in GE-13.

### **MARIAM MOKHTAR**

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