

The Hands Behind Malaysia's False Spring

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To most of the country's independent political observers, it is very clear now. With the unveiling of the new proposed law restricting our right to peaceful assembly and protest, the Malaysian public has been taken for a ride on the promise of political liberalization and reform made by the Prime Minister on the eve of Malaysia Day this year.

What is the explanation for the apparent turnaround in Najib Razak's initial plan unveiled on 15 September this year to abandon earlier draconian and repressive legislation and to improve our civil liberties?

Is it that there was really no enlightened plan but in fact a calculated and cynical move aimed at strangling the right to peaceful assembly – a potential game changer in the country's political dynamics – whilst holding out crumbs of comfort that the government is being sincere about political liberalization on less important fronts?

If so, the Prime Minister must be congratulated on producing academy award performances not on just one occasion but for an entire two-month period in which he consistently extolled the merit of the Barisan Nasional moves to advance civil liberties and good governance in the country when plotting the exact opposite.

Even as late as today the Prime Minister continues to praise the new bill on Peaceful Assembly as a "revolutionary" law and a "giant leap" towards improving individual freedom. He must be the only person in the country to believe that the country will experience a quantum improvement in our basic freedom of assembly with the passing of the new law.

If he is deaf to the overwhelming opposition to the proposed new law coming from all quarters, this coming year's international assessments on the country's civil liberties record will be salutary in reminding the Prime Minister that the country's ranking on civil liberties and his own reputation for honesty have taken an enormous beating from this cynical attempt to kill off political dissent under the guise of improving the law pertaining to the right to assembly.

Were there other forces at work that may have compelled the Prime Minister to engage in this astonishing political turnaround?

If the Prime Minister is not the main actor of this political deception, is it the work of right wing Umno leaders such as Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his son Mukhriz, the Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, Ibrahim Ali as well as Najib's ambitious cousin, the Home Affairs Minister who have pushed him to this unprecedented flip-flopping on political liberalization?

Whichever hands finally prevailed on this obnoxious bill now being debated in Parliament, their mission is clear: to prevent the same exercise of the freedom of peaceful assembly and dissent that are toppling similar authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the world in the hope that they can buy for

themselves a longer lease of authoritarian rule and unchecked power in Malaysia.

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