

Peaceful Assembly Bill A Test Case On Najib's Pledge

MalaysianMirror.com

November 27, 2011

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The Peaceful Assembly Bill is a test case whether the Prime Minister, Najib Razak's pledge on becoming Prime Minister in April 2009 that "the era of government knows best is over", setting the stage for a government that responds to the people's views and concerns, or it was just hocus pocus, bunkum and baloney with the Prime Minister not meaning what he said and not prepared to "walk the talk" right from the start of his premiership.

If Najib is serious that under his administration, the era of "government knows best" is over, then he should not find any difficulty in postponing further the second reading of the Peaceful Assembly Bill and refer it to a Parliamentary Select Committee to have full and meaningful public consultation.

This is to ensure that the new Peaceful Assembly Act is not more repressive than the regime created by Section 27 of the Police Act by bringing about an environment where all Malaysians, particularly the civil society, human right activists and the political opposition, feel more liberated instead of being more suppressed under the new legislative proposals.

The only people who are happy with the Peaceful Assembly Bill are the Police and the Home Minister, who have been armed with arbitrary powers to impose restrictive and onerous conditions, reducing the constitutional rights of Malaysians to freedom of assembly an empty one.

Najib had already run afoul of his declaration that his administration recognized that the era of "government knows best" is over, for the Peaceful Assembly Bill was drafted under the old mindset and mentality that the "government knows best" – which is why the Bill has attracted universal opposition, protest and condemnation.

It would appear that Najib has too many speech writers, with the speech writer responsible for his "the era of government knows best is over" statement after he became Prime Minister in April 2009, a very different person from the speech writer of his parliamentary speech on Thursday where he could make the ridiculous declaration that the Peaceful Assembly Bill is a "revolutionary" piece of reform.

One reason why Najib's public persona suffers from a schizophrenic image is that one set of his speech writers do not know what another set of speech writers have committed on behalf of the Prime Minister, as illustrated by the Peaceful Assembly Bill incident.

It is reported that the Prime Minister has ordered the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Nazri Aziz to review the Peaceful Assembly Bill as Najib was overseas when the Bill was presented to Cabinet for approval.

If this is true, it neither reflects well on Najib's premiership nor on the Deputy Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin who would have acted as Chairman of the Cabinet during Najib's absence.

What about the other Cabinet Ministers? Were they just a Cabinet of sheep who have no views of their own and could not see instantly that the proposed Peaceful Assembly Bill is completely unacceptable and would not pass muster any meaningful consultation with the civic society, human rights activists and the political Opposition?

Although there have been conflicting reports of seven to eight amendments being considered for the Peaceful Assembly Bill, they all seem to revolve around the outrageous provision of 30-day notice for any assembly to be held – which had been made totally unacceptable when only five days' notice is required in a country so backward on human rights such as Myanmar!

The 30-day notice is not the only objectionable provision in the Peaceful Assembly Bill, as other provisions should also be deleted. To cite as examples, the arbitrary powers of the police to impose restrictive conditions, the role of the Home Minister in cases of appeal, the ban on street protests, the list of prohibited areas or 50-metre vicinity disallowing the holding of assemblies, the ban on underaged children and the onerous and crippling fines for offences under the Bill.

Najib should explain what is in the indecent haste that the Peaceful Assembly Bill, despite the universal objection, protest and condemnation, that it must be passed by Dewan Rakyat next week?

Is it just to allow Najib to have a “trophy” to present to the UMNO General Assembly?

If Najib postpones the second reading of the Bill and refers it to a Parliamentary Select Committee, he will have a real “trophy” to take to the Umno General Assembly next week, which is that he really meant what he said and that he walked the talk that the era of government knows best is over.

The ball is in Najib's court.

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