

Old Poison, Fancy Bottle
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By Charles Santiago

It's not easy to figure out what's happening in Malaysia. We have a government that back tracks on promised reforms, flip flops on decisions and tries to deliver its nonsense on a silver platter to the people.

Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak croons the country is ready to enter a new era, with heightened maturity - whatever that means is vague because its proposed amendments and dismantling of various laws in Malaysia are merely cosmetic changes.

Malaysia is one of the 16 countries which have not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). The country's institutionalized racial discrimination had contributed to a severe brain drain, with 1.4 million people with tertiary education having left the country.

And yet the government has pulled back plans to table a legislation, in Parliament, to do away with hate crimes and weed out racial discrimination. Mohd Nazri Abdul Aziz, Minister in the Prime Minister's department, attributed this about turn to being able to manage our race relations better.

Last year we saw school teachers and a principal using racial slur to ridicule Chinese and Indian students. To top that, Malay rights group, Perkasa, was openly inciting racial tension by spewing venom.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community has also come under severe attacks recently. The organizers of Seksualiti Merdeka, an annual festival of talks, shows, forums and film screenings to promote sexuality rights have been targeted, ridiculed and threatened.

In 1994, the government banned anyone who is homosexual, bisexual or transsexual from appearing on the state-controlled media.

We have not progressed to curb such explicit hatred against the LGBT community since then.

In 2010, the Film Censorship Board stated it would only allow the depiction of homosexuality if the characters repented or died.

Now we have some segments of the society suggesting individuals from the marginalized LGBT community must be banned from appearing on air altogether.

And yet the legislation to root out hate crimes is on the back burner.

Even though Najib has been trumpeting the fact that he did away with three Emergency Ordinances, we know better as other crucial reforms are simply shadow play.

For example, the Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill is not a radical shift from the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) which allows for indefinite detention. The new Bill still allows for indefinite detention up to 28 days from the 60 days under the ISA.

If this is what Najib means by revamping the judiciary, he better think again for any indefinite detention poses a grave threat to fundamental liberties. And Human Rights Watch candidly sums this up by saying that the failure to bring a detainee before a judge, without any delay, violates international standards for prompt judicial review.

The Bill also gives wide powers to the police. Holding detainees up to 48 hours opens the channel for abusive interrogation. And we have seen one too many cases of police abuse while in detention. Between

2003-2007, there were 1535 custodial deaths in the country.

Under the new Bill, the police would have the power to intercept communication and conduct searches without judicial warrant.

It would also permit the police to unilaterally place monitoring devices on people who are released from detention and allow a blanket provision to deny bail.

Is this how Najib and his government want to treat a matured society? Does the prime minister truly believe that passing off a proposed law which allows for serious infringement on personal and civil liberties as reform would go unnoticed by the people?

We want true democracy. We want the government to seriously respect our civil and political rights. What we don't want is the feel good factor.

The renowned poet, Hafiz, said "Not even seven thousand years of joy is worth seven days of depression". Maybe Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak could learn from his poetry.

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