

Hands OFF the Media
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By Charles Santiago

The Malaysian police have selective blindness. They can see clearly when it comes to chasing protesters and beating them up. Their vision does not play tricks when they douse water and go berserk with their tear gas guns. But the police cannot tell the difference between media workers and others. Or so claims the police chief, Ismail Omar.

And he thinks we are fools to believe him.

Journalists, cameramen and photographers wear their media tags when on duty. You can spot them without any effort. We all do, except the police of course.

Twelve media workers were badly attacked by the police during Saturday's Bersih rally, calling for the clean-up of the country's electoral system. Personal accounts from them clearly show they were physically assaulted to prevent documentation of police violence on the protesters.

Now the police chief and prime minister Najib Tun Razak are scrambling to cover-up the mess. While Najib whispered his apology, the police top gun wants media workers to wear a vest, screaming "media" so that his bully-boys don't beat them up, blue black.

This whole incident plus the violence unleashed on the protesters is a slap on Najib's face. Clearly, the premier has lost it. He lost the confidence of Malaysians, some time back, with his flip-flopping policy decisions. Now Najib has shown he is unfit to govern the country and cares two hoots about media freedom and democracy.

Control of information is a tool used by totalitarian and repressive regimes, Barisan Nasional included. Dictators fear the spread of information and use their goons to suppress media freedom by attacking journalists. This is what precisely happened at the Bersih rally.

Media workers worldwide have paid dearly for reporting on democratic aspirations or opposition movements and dissent. One such person is Mary Colvin, who died this year when several shells rained down on the building she was staying at in the Syrian city of Homs.

Colvin lost her eyesight in Sri Lanka, while covering the civil war, when a shrapnel caught her eye. Wearing an eye patch, she soldiered on to report the truth on the ground.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) estimates that at least 43 journalists were killed last year in line of duty. These were people who put their lives on the front line to report on political unrest stretching from the Arab world to the drug wars in Mexico.

A free media is essential in a functioning democracy. Without freedom of the press, democracies will fail to exist. The people have a right to know about their government; about their leaders.

As such, media workers must be allowed to work in an environment that is free from fear and harassment.

In Malaysia, it seems that a culture of violence is perpetrated to silence journalists. We have seen and

heard of journalists being beaten and threatened by the police during several rallies and street protests even before last Saturday.

This cannot be tolerated. It's simply not on to use journalists as punching bags. The police chief must take responsibility for the belligerent conduct of his men in uniform and resign. And so must Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein for spewing rubbish about the Standard Operating Procedures of the police, in an attempt to quickly gloss over the mess.

I pledge solidarity with the journalists who were brutally attacked by the police during the Bersih rally. And in line with the World Press Freedom Day, let's wear black with yellow wristbands to show them our support.

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