

Najib Makes A Mockery Of World Press Freedom Day
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On World Press Freedom Day, today, the safety of reporters and the integrity of journalism are like egg on Prime minister Najib Abdul Razak's face.

During the March launch of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, Najib had boasted, "Since I become prime minister, Malaysia has moved up nine places in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, even as the likes of the United States and Great Britain have slid down".

Today, he is the pariah of South East Asia.

Last March, Najib claimed that during his three-year premiership, the media had achieved more freedom. A month later, his words have come to haunt him.

Last Saturday, several journalists, both local and foreign, covering Bersih 3.0, were themselves, the victims of a police assault. Even the BBC was not spared and its televised news coverage of the sit-down protest was censored.

Astro, the so-called independent broadcasting station, have now joined the police and the judiciary, in becoming instruments of the state. All have fallen victim to Najib's deadly threats.

Several pressmen were injured in the closing stages of Bersih 3.0. A reporter from The Sun, was sent to hospital with broken ribs and suspected internal injuries. Caught in the violence, were Al Jazeera reporter Harry Fawcett and videographer, Ray Jones, who witnessed police assaults.

"We saw two or three policemen hold a guy while another was kneeing him either in the face or in the chest, it wasn't clear.

"When we went to record it, I found that we were surrounded by police who were extremely aggressive. They held my arm and gripped my shirt. When I turned around, the camera was on the ground. The camera was wrenched from him (Jones) and our wireless microphone and battery pack was taken. The camera was smashed to the ground....."

A female reporter who tried to photograph some policemen beating up protesters dining at a restaurant, hours after the end of the rally, was herself attacked by the policemen.

Ironically in March, Najib told pressmen, that he had renewed his commitment to review censorship laws and had opted for a more vibrant, transparent and fair media.

He exaggerated that the two online portals - Malaysiakini and The Malaysian Insider – were proof that he was committed towards press freedom.

The self-praise was ill-conceived as both news portals existed long before he assumed the premiership: "It is also why I have relaxed decades-old media licensing requirements, why I have ensured that the online sphere remains completely free of regulations, and why you can log on the likes of Malaysiakini or Malaysian Insider and find regular and strident criticism of the government."

Yet, he failed to mention the thousands of paid cybertroopers who are tasked with leaving negative and

derogatory comments, or who jam these websites with attacks known as distributed denial of service (DDOS). They happened just before the Sarawak state elections and Bersih 3.0.

Malaysia was at ranking number 122 in the 2011-12 Reporters Sans Frontieres press freedom index, compared to 141 in the previous year.

Failure to pay attention to detail is another of Najib's failings. The perceived improved standing is because the fate of journalists in the other Asian countries was far worse than in Malaysia. More had been attacked, jailed or had died from assaults.

Najib succeeded in insulting the memory of these reporters by saying, "And we are now officially one of Southeast Asia's most media-friendly nations, ranked well ahead of Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore."

Singapore's press might as well be gagged. Its government is more oppressive when it comes to freedom of expression. Readers may recall how the British author, Alan Shadrake was incarcerated when he wrote about Singapore's legal system and death penalty.

In Thailand, reporters covering opposition protests have been attacked and there has been a rise in the nation's lese majeste laws. In the Philippines, journalists are murdered or face legal threats.

If only Najib had not uttered the following words at the launch in March: "Butt here are always two sides to every story, and things are rarely as simple as they seem".

The Bersih 3.0 rally had been a triumph for the rakyat. They had assembled peacefully and staged their sit-down protest without incident. The rally had been incident-free, with an unprecedented crowd of over 200,000 people taking part.

This would have spelt disaster for Najib – more egg on his face. Some observers allege that he and his inner circles had engineered trouble to discredit the Bersih organisers and attempt to bring shame on the participants.

Trouble erupted soon after the rally organisers ordered the crowd to disperse. Eyewitness alleged that the police kettled them in and blocked off exits before discharging tear-gas canisters and chemically-laced water from water cannons, onto the crowd.

The police disputed these claims and said protestors had breached Merdeka Square, which had been garlanded with razor wire and surrounded by policemen. In the ensuing panic, with the crowd fleeing, journalists recorded violent beatings by the policemen. The police turned their aggression on the reporters and seized their equipment.

Two weeks ago, British premier David Cameron had discussed with Najib their shared "ambition to reject violent extremism".

Najib did not mean to keep his word. That is why World Press Freedom Day has no significance in Malaysia.

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