

Economist: IS no threat to Malaysia
Free Malaysia Today
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By Joe Fernandez

Belgium faces more of a threat from IS than moderate Malaysia.

KUALA LUMPUR: The timing of Malaysia's Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) was "suspicious" especially since as a country with a moderate population, including Muslims who form slightly over half, it doesn't face any threats, states the UK-based The Economist in an op-ed piece.

The comment ran under the heading, Terror in Malaysia – Lurch to illiberalism – An anti-terror law curtails liberties.

"The Prevention of Terrorism Act gives a government panel the right to imprison terror suspects for two years, with multiple extensions, or restrict their movements for five years," said The Economist. "Critics spy another blow to civil liberties, which were already under siege."

The proverbial fig-leaf being used, notes the magazine, was the presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) occupying parts of the two countries. "Officials reckon that at least a dozen Malaysians have died abroad fighting for the militants."

"Police say that since 2013 they have arrested around 90 people suspected of 'sympathising' with them."

On April 5, just hours before Parliament began debating POTA, the magazine said with alarm, "police nabbed 17 people who they said were planning attacks on Kuala Lumpur, the capital, and on Putrajaya, the government seat."

"The timing looked suspicious to opponents of the act, which include Pakatan Rakyat, the informal opposition alliance."

Fewer Malaysians than, for example Belgians, are thought to have traveled to Syria, points out the magazine. "Nor is Malaysia battling provincial Islamic insurgencies of the sort that trouble its neighbours, Thailand and the Philippines."

The government has produced no evidence that such sweeping powers are warranted, the International Commission of Jurists, a human-rights group, has noted, said the magazine. "It laments that only one member of the government's detention panel need have legal experience."

"Even without the panel's consent, police may now hold suspects for up to 60 days."

The big worry is that the law will become a new weapon in a worsening crackdown on opponents of Umno, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's party, which has ruled Malaysia in coalition since the 1950s but which was nearly unseated in elections held in 2013.

In the first three months of this year, the magazine continues, police arrested 36 people on suspicion of making comments that violated the Sedition Act, another archaic law which is being invoked more frequently than ever.

Last month, it noted, Lembah Pantai MP Nurul Izzah was arrested on suspicion of sedition after she delivered a speech in Parliament denouncing the imprisonment of her father, Anwar Ibrahim, who leads the Opposition. "Many think the sodomy charge against him was politically motivated."

Other recent detainees, said The Economist, include five staff at the Malaysian Insider, a news website, and a cartoonist called Zunar, who faces nine counts of sedition and a prison sentence of up to 43 years.

Najib had promised to roll back the Sedition Act, just as he junked the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA). "Yet, while pushing through the new anti-terror rules, his government took the opportunity to table changes to the act which would greatly toughen sentences and forbid speech that denigrates religion."

Both pieces of legislation highlight how far Malaysia has retreated from the reformist policies that Najib espoused during his first term, which ended in 2013, lamented The Economist. "Supporters plead that the Prime Minister was tacking right only to head off leadership challenges from even less palatable elements in his party."

Mahathir Mohamad, an influential former Prime Minister has renewed calls for Najib to step down," observed the magazine. "But that is not much comfort to anyone."

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