

MALAYSIA'S RECORD OF DEMOCRACY AND FREE SPEECH IS STRONG

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Real patriots don't try to blacken our country's name abroad just for political gain

By Najib Tun Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia

On August 31st Malaysia marked 60 years of independence, and along with a record haul of medals at the SEA Games, we also celebrated six decades of our country being a stable democracy and a free society. In fact, when it comes to fiercely fought elections and the freedom to speak your mind, Malaysia has the strongest and longest democratic record in the whole of Southeast Asia. Our past elections show this, with different parties winning different states and prominent politicians losing their seats; for no results can be guaranteed in a free democratic vote. It is up to the people to choose, and that is a record of which all Malaysians should be proud.

In recent weeks, however, it appears that the political Opposition does not share that respect for our tradition of democracy. They and their allies have sought to blacken our country's name in the American media, making a series of wild claims, culminating in the false claim that Malaysia is in danger of sliding into dictatorship.

There is an irony here, in that one of the Opposition's leaders – it is still not clear who is the actual leader – has admitted that he was a “dictator” during his 22 years in power. And it is true that when he was prime minister, hundreds of people were summarily locked up under the Internal Security Act. Newspapers, including a major national daily, were closed. The judiciary was attacked. Crony capitalism was rife, with deals made that significantly burden the people today. People had no right to demonstrate, and students were not allowed to participate in politics.

But Malaysia's democracy survived, and under my Government, it has been strengthened with the most far-reaching reforms since independence. We repealed the ISA – and ended

the State of Emergency that had existed for over 60 years. These were major steps that required great political courage – but we went forward with them because removing these outdated and repressive pieces of legislation was the right thing to do.

We increased media freedom by scrapping restrictions on newspaper publishing licenses. We reformed the Universities and University Colleges Act to allow undergraduates to participate in political activities.

Everyone knows that demonstrations, which would never have been allowed under the former leader, have taken place in Kuala Lumpur over the last few years. Why? Because we passed the Peaceful Assembly Act, for the first time enshrining in law the right to peaceful protest – which we recognise as being part of a democratic society.

We have faith in Malaysia's democracy, and in the right of the people to air their views. The Opposition, however, has tried to make out in the American press that critics of the Government are "routinely imprisoned". Why, then, is it that you will find praise for Opposition politicians in our national newspaper, and vigorous debate – including plenty of criticism of the Government – on Malaysia's web portals?

There is one well-known academic who, ever since he came back to Malaysia to take up a post at a Government-funded think tank – and in a position funded by the Noah Foundation, set up by my own grandfather – has taken every opportunity to attack me and my policies, from our participation in international trade deals, to the administration of BR1M, to foreign investment in Malaysia.

He is at perfect liberty to do so, just as the Opposition's real mastermind, Lim Kit Siang, is at liberty to make all manner of accusations about me – however much I and my colleagues may think they are wrong. Why? Because we believe in, and we practise, free speech in this country.

Finally, contrary to what the Opposition's proxies in the media have alleged, we firmly believe in upholding the rule of law. It is essential to the safety, security and welfare of any society – and the excellence of the financial markets regulations we have put in place, for instance, has been recognised in numerous world rankings.

But that also means that if someone breaks the law, they must face the consequences. So when an MP breaks the Official Secrets Act, for example, he is arrested – just as he would be in other countries – not for being a Government critic, but for breaking the law. Our record is consistent in Malaysia. Even former cabinet ministers and state chief ministers on both sides of the political divide have been taken to court; and when they appear, it is the judges, not the Government, who decide who goes to jail, no matter how high up or prominent they are. That is because Malaysia’s judiciary has recovered its independence, compared with the dark days of the judiciary crisis of 1988.

The truth is that this Government upholds democracy. We uphold free speech. And we uphold the rule of law. Our record is clear, as is the enhancement of the people’s freedoms under this administration. The Opposition’s ability to argue against us so openly and vigorously is proof of the increased freedom Malaysians have. They opposition are welcome to do so, and they do indeed do so, as Malaysians know from regular reports on both traditional and new media.

But falsely running down Malaysia’s vibrant democracy and spreading smears and falsehoods about this Government in foreign newspapers just for political gain is another matter. That does not show pride in what we have achieved. Nor does it demonstrate love of our country. And that is what should be uniting us now as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of independence and look back on the milestones that have made Malaysia the diverse, harmonious and confident country it is today.

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