



Criticizing Leaders in Malaysia: Democracy vs. Dictatorship

Malaysia continues to be beset by a succession of shocks concerning various issues involving the Prime Minister. Most recently, this includes the arrest of a female TikTok account holder under the moniker Jorjet Myla, pursuant to the Sedition Act 1948 and several other statutes, merely for criticizing the country's top leader. Myla was subsequently remanded for three days, prompting several groups to assemble before the Dang Wangi District Police Headquarters in a display of solidarity.

Anyone who viewed the TikTok video (which is no longer accessible) would find that the criticisms levelled by Myla were not new; indeed, all of her points were already public knowledge and have long been discussed by numerous parties. In short, Myla was neither slandering the Prime Minister nor peddling falsehoods; rather, her criticisms were predicated on facts and the Prime Minister's track record, which the public is already well aware of.

Prior to this, in an issue that remains highly contentious, the country was appalled when the Prime Minister allegedly directed the police to apprehend participants of a rally protesting an illegal house of worship (Hinduism temple), threatening to “throw” them into prison. The assembly, which coincided with the official visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Malaysia, saw the arrest of several activists, including lawyer, by a police detachment.

This is what has elicited public sympathy and solidarity for Myla, as many have grown exasperated with a Prime Minister who appears utterly intolerant of criticism, whereby anyone daring to do so risks being hauled to the police station and spending the nights behind bars. This is despite the fact that the right to criticize is an integral component of the freedom of speech guaranteed under a democratic system, and is specifically enshrined within the Constitution itself. The Prime Minister, however, seems completely indifferent to these principles.

Nevertheless, another facet of the issue has courted controversy when several other videos of Myla subsequently went viral, exposing her demeanour, which was characterized by the extensive use of vulgar language in her critiques. These videos consequentially drew criticism and condemnation from netizens – who may very well comprise government cybertroopers – serving as a counter-offensive against Myla's supporters.

Virtual debates continue to revolve around the issue of the woman's morality on one hand, and the issue of her arrest by the authorities for criticizing the Prime Minister on the other. Evidently, one faction is fiercely condemning the Prime Minister's administration, perceiving it as anti-criticism, while the opposing faction attempts to defend the Prime Minister by arguing that the Myla's arrest was entirely justified.

The fundamental issue is quite straightforward: if the Prime Minister felt that Myla had defamed him, he could simply initiate a civil defamation suit against her and

resolve the matter in court, as is customary in his other defamation cases. Myla could perhaps be apprehended for other offenses pertaining to public morality. However, arresting her for the specific offense of criticizing the Prime Minister is not only highly inappropriate, but it also clearly contravenes the very Constitution that the Prime Minister himself ostensibly reveres.

In reality, it is a globally acknowledged fact – not merely known to Malaysians – that the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, during his tenure in the opposition, was the most vocal critic of every Prime Minister of the day. He fought vehemently to abolish laws he characterized as draconian, including the Sedition Act.

Ironically, since ascending to the premiership, Anwar has not only retained the said draconian Act but has repeatedly utilized it in the exact same manner as the previous Prime Ministers he once viciously condemned. Furthermore, what exacerbates the public's anger is that throughout his time as an opposition figure, Anwar consistently projected himself as a democratic icon, a victim of state tyranny, a champion of free speech, and a leader open to criticism. Today, all of these portrayals have inverted completely upon his assumption of the comfortable seat of the Prime Minister.

It is true that we do not condone individuals devoid of moral decorum; however, if the substance of their criticism is valid, the criticized party ought to take heed and transform for the better. This is our expectation. That is one perspective.

From another perspective, however, our hopes have long been dashed. The reality is that within a democracy, the rulers are shaped by the corrupt system, and the corrupt system is shaped by the rulers. The rulers safeguard the system, and the system safeguards the rulers. The ones left entirely unprotected are the people. Consequently, we witness that democracy will perpetually favour and protect the rulers, rather than favouring or protecting the people. Thus, we observe that within a democratic system, the people frequently become casualties of both the rulers and the system.

Democracy and freedom of speech will only function (for the people) provided the leader is praised and flattered. However, democracy loses its function the moment a leader is criticized or held accountable. The people are only free to speak if their voices align with the leader's desires. Dire consequences await those whose voice sentiments unfavoured by the leader. This is not a new phenomenon under democracy, nor is it exclusive to Malaysia. In a democratic system, the people are allegedly granted the right to choose their leaders. In reality, the people are merely granted the right to choose which "dictator" will rule over them!

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

Abdul Hakim Othman

Official Spokesperson of Hizb ut Tahrir in Malaysia