

Malaysia: Why is the Government Complaining about the “Deep State”?

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The Pakatan Harapan government is failing to deliver its election promises of progressive reform. Don't blame the “deep state” — blame their lack of determination and their own reliance on police dirty tricks.

You have to laugh at the way one Pakatan Harapan (PH) leader after another is trying to justify their broken election promises by pointing to this new-found mysterious “deep state”. First it was Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah who said that the “deep state” in Malaysia is out to undermine the PH government. This was after the prime minister said there was an attempt to get the rulers to sign an order against the government’s decision to ratify the Rome Statute. Now, Saifuddin adds that the deep state is at work to sabotage the PH government’s plans to sign four other human rights treaties.

It didn’t take long for the former leader of the opposition, Lim Kit Siang, to latch on to this new-found excuse for PH’s failure to deliver its GE14 manifesto promises:

“The deep state in Malaysia is an important reason behind the slow progress in institutional and political reforms for New Malaysia... the deep state would be even more assertive and obstructive if it is convinced that the PH government is only for a short period of time and would dissolve in a matter of months.”

This deep state is so enigmatic that these PH leaders say “it can be inside the government and you can’t identify it!” Very soon we might hear reports of mass hysteria breaking out during Cabinet meetings.

These deep state theorists (or are they more theologians?) refer to a “state within a state” pursuing its agenda from outside the national political leadership. We know that ever since the PH government came into existence under the leadership of Dr Mahathir Mohamad, there have been factional struggles which continue today not only between the coalition parties but also within the component parties.

Let’s take the simplest case of a promised reform on which PH has reneged, namely the recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) of the independent Chinese secondary schools. Are we to believe that this mysterious deep state is also pressuring the PH against recognising UEC and that the PH leaders are in a state of paralytic inertia?

If the reference to the deep state is about the increasing non-accountability of the police and the Special Branch and ever-encroaching Bumiputera-ism, this trend can be traced to the time when Mahathir stamped his authoritarian populist rule on the country from 1981.

In 1987, for example, my perceptions of the Malaysian Special Branch were sharpened during my incarceration under the Internal Security Act during Operation Lalang. In the interminable

interrogation sessions with the Special Branch officers, I was given the impression that they could get away with whatever they wanted. Operation Lalang was, after all, the most extreme example of a regime that had taken the law into its own hands when it detained without trial a whole spectrum of dissidents it detested.

Mahathir in recent years has claimed innocence over Operation Lalang by passing the buck to the police. In fact, former Bar Council president Param Cumaraswamy wrote about Mahathir's reply to the Bar Council protest over Ops Lalang, dated Dec 2, 1987:

"If I have to resort to the ISA it is because I am forced to by the irresponsibility of those who do not appreciate my liberal attitude and seem bent on destabilising this country. My responsibility is towards the vast majority who feel threatened by the race-baiting indulged in by a frustrated minority unable to impose their thinking on this country."

When Operation Lalang was launched in 1987, Bapa Malaysia, the Tunku called ours a police state:

"It's a police state when you can go and arrest people at will without giving any reason other than they think they are a security risk... I do not concede with Mahathir's contention that his measures are predicated solely on the extreme tension between Malays and Chinese last month which brought the country close to serious racial rioting... It's not a question of Chinese against the government but his own party, Umno, who are against him" (K Das/Suaram: "The White paper on the October Affair and the Why? Papers", Suaram, Petaling Jaya 1989: 10).

Lim wrote on Feb 9, 2011:

"Mahathir cannot shirk responsibility by passing the buck to the police but must come clean and apologise to the nation for masterminding Operation Lalang, the darkest chapter of human rights in Malaysia, paving the way for a wholesale clampdown and subversion of the media, the judiciary and organs of state, whether the police, the Election Commission or the anti-corruption agency in the rest of his premiership."

And it was Mahathir's Bumiputra-ist populism that led to the scenario today when Malay supremacists can threaten to unleash another May 13 incident if the government goes ahead with the ratification of ICERD and other treaties that promote justice, equality and human rights.

Today, Malaysia's Special Branch seems to have gone even further to the dark side in its covert operations - Suhakam has accused it of being behind the enforced disappearance of two social activists, Amri Che Mat and Pastor Raymond Koh. Note that Mahathir pooh-poohed Suhakam's findings about the abduction of Koh.

We have known all along that the Malaysian Special Branch conducts surveillance, intelligence gathering and infiltrations in all aspects of Malaysian society including ruling party politicians and even royal households. When he executed his coup de grace against Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, Mahathir revealed as much in press conferences, using intelligence which could only have come from the Special Branch and his other informers. The latest video of an alleged minister in a homosexual liaison with another colleague is another example of such basic "dirty tricks" by Malaysian politicians. It is not the dark machinations of the so-called deep state.

Mahathir as prime minister has always been close to the Special Branch and Abdul Hamid Bador, the newly appointed IGP, is his trusted ally:

"The SB is now in the hands of a person who has used it before to blackmail, silence, incarcerate, and detain his critics. If Malaysia aspires to be a true democracy, then the SB is totally out of

control. Who is a subversive or terrorist is left for the SB to decide. Extra-judicial abductions are unconstitutional. Many detainees have been prisoners of conscience or prisoners for their religious beliefs” (Murray Hunter, Asia Sentinel).

Under Mahathir, the Special Branch is even more powerful now than it was under the Barisan Nasional government. Thus, if PH is really concerned about this deep state, its lawmakers should point their fingers at their “great saviour” and make the Special Branch accountable to Parliament. Mahathir will then not be able to pass the buck to the police in any arrests and detentions. But please, PH leaders, spare us the pseudo-theories about the so-called deep state to justify renegeing on your election promises.

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