

Assault on NGOs is a shame

KHOO YING HOOI

Published: 13 January 2014

I find it disturbing when I heard the news that our Home Ministry has declared the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process (Comango) as an illegal entity. Such action also caught the international attention, including the condemnation by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

Puzzling, why does a coalition of human rights organisations need to be registered?

Comango has been engaging with the government, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since the first Universal Periodic Review (UPR) way back in 2008 before its first review was carried out in the UNHRC in Geneva in February 2009.

The most significant factor restricting the development of NGOs is clearly Malaysia's regulatory environment.

It is common that NGOs especially those striving to protect and uphold human rights find it difficult to register as an organisation under the Societies Act 1966 as the Registrar of Societies (ROS) is uncommonly slow in registering any human rights-based organisations. Due to the delay and hindrance by the authorities, most of the NGOs are left with no choice but to register itself under the Companies Act 1965.

All over the world, we see trends of increasing interaction between governments and NGOs. Such a trend is inevitable as the roles of NGOs are becoming more crucial from time to time.

Similarly, the numbers of NGOs in various forms have been increasing in Malaysia over the last few decades. However, the relationship between the Malaysian government and the NGOs has deteriorated.

The relationship is moving towards the wrong direction.

Recent attacks on Comango, and several other NGOs and movements such as Gerakan Turun Kos Sara Hidup (Turun) and Gerakan Media Marah (Geramm) are obvious examples.

These NGOs in Malaysia have gained a reputation as the leading campaigner for the democracy of the country particularly after the 2008 polls. But those particularly championing human rights issues are always seen as opposing the country's national interest, and perceived as a threat.

NGOs are the key for improving the quality of governance, strengthening people power, enabling development and strengthening democracy. However, very often the government is missing the point that NGOs play a crucial role in creating and sustaining a rights-based society.

The Malaysian government has responded fiercely to the rise of social activism in the country and takes up a defensive approach whenever the issues arise.

The spectacular growing number of NGOs is fundamentally changing the balance of power and their increased roles are seen as rather an unpleasant one for the Malaysian government, which is already handicapped as citizens have lost confidence in it.

As famously described by many scholars, the history of human rights in Malaysia can be well described as a history of progress and retrogression: of moving one step forward, only to move two steps back.

After all, the various principles of human rights should be the foundation of Malaysian culture. Therefore there is a need to mainstream human rights in Malaysia particularly on the area concerning civil and political rights.

Consequently, it is crucial to recognise that the connotation of human rights is not negative or anti-government, and most importantly, not anti-Islam. – January 13, 2014.

** This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of The Malaysian Insider.*
