

Democracy and 'street hooligans'

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A year after the 13th general election, Malaysian politics has become even more fragmented than before.

One thing remains, and that is the necessity of protests and demonstrations.

Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said street protests aimed at toppling the government ran contrary to democratic practice.

He said, "In old democracies like in Europe or America, if people are dissatisfied with the government that was elected by the majority, they wait until the general election again to topple it."

Yes, Dr Mahathir is right about the democratic theory. It presumes that if people are satisfied with their government, they will get a new government via the voting channel.

But Dr Mahathir missed one critical point. Malaysia is not a democratic country.

As a matter of fact, even in democratic countries, people are still taking to the streets. A democratic system does not expect every citizen to be endowed with democracy through legislative debates and ballot boxes.

Moreover, any democratic system would allow demonstrations to take place without repression.

Today, electoral authoritarianism is rampant, and Malaysia is one of them. In such a form, regular election is the basic method to legitimise the regime.

Real power lies in the hands of the ruler but the impression given is that it is derived from the will of the people. Doesn't that sound familiar?

Challenging the status quo like what we have in Malaysia is indeed an arduous task.

The Barisan Nasional regime has various ways to limit the effectiveness of challengers. It is one of the key “advantages” of being an electoral authoritarian regime.

Hence, demonstrations are often seen as “antagonist”. In other words, protesters are groups of people who attempt to stop a policy or practice which would otherwise go ahead unquestioned.

Even worse, the government does more than simply scrutinise demonstrations. They also limit and control it in a variety of ways, be it through laws such as the Peaceful Assembly Act or by creating false impressions.

To many people, protesters are troublemakers. They are the hooligans on the streets. Such an image is created as part of an attempt to show that the “right to protest” is counter to “law and order”.

One interesting phenomenon is that there is a growing trend of counter-demonstrations going on in the country. For example, the demonstrations staged by Perkasa.

So why are portions of Malaysians still engaging in protest activities? It is because their demands are continuously being ignored by the ruling regime.

If they continue, they are portrayed as illogical and unreasonable. Then, if they keep on, they are portrayed as violent and punished.

Many more demonstrations are expected in the future and they must be seen as an integral part of political action in our society. Without them, injustices and repression would continue to occur and go unchallenged.

At the end of the day, it is about democratising not only the politics of our country, but also its economy, accountability, integrity and social fabric. – May 4, 2014.

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