

Malaysian LGBTI scapegoats at election time

Monday 12 February 2018, by [Malaysiakini](#) (Date first published: 8 February 2018).

Some ruling and opposition parties use anti-LGBTI rhetoric to 'prove' their Islamic credentials at election time. This encourages a hardening of public attitudes and reduction in public sector services to Malaysian LGBTI communities. Among the opposition parties, only the anticapitalist PSM and parts of the liberal DAP in Penang state have included LGBTI rights in their electoral programmes.

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MALAYSIAKINI SPECIAL REPORT | In a Malaysian general election, political parties canvass the different ethnic groups and start a game on the chessboard.

Racial proportions have always been the axis of reference in calculating the direction of the electorate; however, sexual minorities are often made pawns without due consideration of their rights.

"As a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, I know that both the country's political coalitions cannot openly support sexual minorities because of the religious factor," Faris Saad, a 34-year-old transgender man, said with a helpless smile.

Faris works as a journalist and he is also vocalist and guitarist for a band. He believes that Malaysians on the ground do not hate sexual minorities, but the politicians often use the mainstream media to oppress sexual minorities in order to prove themselves more "Islamic".

"As long as the giants fight and use us as pawns, nothing positive can happen. The pawn is the smallest piece in chess and you can just sacrifice them for your larger agenda," added Dorian Wilde, a member of the transgender rights NGO Justice For Sisters.

Asked about the political position of sexual minorities in Malaysia, interviewees echoed the same view.

Transgender activist Nisha Ayub worries that the negative messages on the mainstream media will lead to persecution and violence towards sexual minorities.

"Whatever is happening in society now is the result of the authorities, including the government and the syariah system.

"When they portray the transgender community negatively to the public, they are actually encouraging hate and inciting more anger in society.

"This is something I fear. I am sad to say that the LGBT community is being used as a scapegoat. They want to be seen as the most Islamic party, so they use us as an example by saying 'We are anti-

LGBT' to gain support," she said.

Nisha's opinion seems to reflect statements made by politicians in recent years on sexual minority rights, which more often than not is a political hot potato.

In February 2016, Amanah adviser Ahmad Awang described the LGBT community as a major social ill and said his party would form an advisory council to address the "problem".

On the other hand, DAP Tanjung Bungah assemblyperson Teh Yee Cheu (photo) chaired the first meeting of the Penang Transgender Committee in May 2016.

However, PAS Ulama wing chief Mahfodz Mohamed then condemned the DAP-led Penang government for becoming the first state to recognise LGBTs.

A few days later, Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng issued a statement saying the transgender committee was only the "individual effort" of the assemblyperson concerned.

Last September, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak pledged that LGBT activities would have no place in Malaysia and that all sectors should work towards creating a progressive Islamic country.

A tolerant past

However, Chong Yee Shan, a member of LGBT NGO Diversity Malaysia, pointed out that while the BN government was relatively tolerant of sexual minorities in the past, sexual minority rights have been sacrificed as political parties vie to become more Islamic.

"The government even subsidised transgender NGOs, which then opened some tailoring classes for transgenders. Why has the situation become like this?"

Citing the Islamic Development Department (Jakim) and the empowering of state religious departments by BN, alongside the hudud law proposal by PAS, Chong said the "competition of Islamisation" began in the 1970s and continues today.

Is there any way to reverse the situation? To change the mindset of the people, Chong (photo) suggested looking back at the nation's history to see the possibility of an inclusive Malaysia, instead of merely grafting on the human rights narrative of the West.

The transgender women (or "trans women") NGO that Chong referred to is the Association of Transsexuals in the Federal Territory (Persatuan Mak Nyah Wilayah Persekutuan), which was set up in 1987. There were about 500 trans women of different races and religions involved in the association. [1]

The association received a grant of RM50,000 from the Social Welfare Department to help them start small businesses, such as salons and boutiques.

Besides that, the association also helped members who were assaulted or harassed to file police reports towards creating empowerment for the community.

Nisha also mentioned that in the 1980s, there was a team of doctors and psychologists at the government University of Malaya Hospital that performed sex reassignment surgeries on transgender people.

The hospital authorities also successfully lobbied the National Registry Department to change their patients' sex markers in official documents.

According to a 2014 Human Rights Watch report, one of the physicians in the team, Dr Khairuddin Yusuf, said that they stopped the surgeries after the National Fatwa Council "expressed concern," with the medical team's scientific reasoning not being accepted.

Choosing an executioner

In any case, the interviewees agreed a change in social thinking would be a long-term process, with the coming general election a more immediate issue.

Faris said he has not yet decided who to vote for, adding that voting for any one of the coalitions would be akin to choosing his own executioner and as such he hasn't decided who "is going to kill me".

Wilde (photo) recalled that he was a passionate first-time voter in the last general election, who hoped to bring change through his vote. He said he is still hesitating about his choice in the coming election and he does not rule out the possibility of spoiling his vote.

"PSM (Parti Sosialis Malaysia) only participates in a few places and it is the only political party in Malaysia which has put LGBT rights in its manifesto. A lot of people would say that PSM is not Islamic, but is the point of the country to be Islamic or to be good for its citizens?"

PSM will be contesting 20 seats in GE14, comprising five parliamentary seats and 15 state seats. Although the influence of PSM is relatively small, it is like a beacon in the darkness in the eyes of sexual minorities.

Malaysia practises the first-past-the-post electoral system, which favours the two largest blocs for most constituencies. In other words, it is hard for PSM to have an impact on the national scale since it only has one member of Parliament for now.

Maria Chin Abdullah, the chairperson of Bersih, has suggested that Malaysia considers adopting the mixed member proportional system, which will improve the diversity of legislatures plus the quality of debates, scrutiny, and legislation.

The system, which is employed in Germany, will provide more spaces for small parties, allowing voters to be freed from the dilemma of "picking one of two", and ensuring that the voices of specific minority groups are not eliminated in this merciless game of chess.

Source: Malaysiakini <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/411519>

Footnotes

[1] [According to Khartini Slamah's article "The struggle to be ourselves, neither men nor women: Mak Nyahs in Malaysia," published in the collection "Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia,"