

Rakyat Itu Raja! (The People are the King)

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It has, for reasons best known to some, become rather trendy to talk about the restoration of power to the King these days. Looking around the troubled landscape of Malaysia at the moment one does understand how and why the frustration of many could have led them to the conclusion that some higher form of intervention is badly needed at the moment. After all, four years on after the victory of the BN parties at the last polls it would appear as if none of the reform measures promised by the current administration have borne fruit: None of the major corruption cases have been resolved in court; reported incidents of abuse by the police have only increased; there is still talk of racial and religious communitarianism in our midst and the fanciful ego-trips of some politicians have compelled them to reach for the keris again and again in public.

By all accounts, it would appear as if the country has regressed over the years and we seem even closer towards sliding into the deeper morass of religious and racial sectarian politics. As if the divide-and-rule rhetoric of the race-based BN parties was not enough, now we are told that there will be a Muslim workers movement to rival the MTUC, which can only serve to divide the workers of Malaysia along religious sectarian lines even further.

This can only add to the weakening of the workers movement in Malaysia, to the benefit of the established powers-that-be whose own divisive sectarian politics have brought us to where we are today.

So indeed, some kind of intervention is timely and badly needed, but from where, and who should be the actors and agents of change here?

One can point to legal and constitutional guidelines about the powers and responsibilities of the rulers of Malaysia. One can also highlight the fact that the Agong is technically the head of state and head of the armed forces. But to fall back on such a position in times of crisis would be akin to handing the country over to the UN when Malaysia's problems are really its own doing, and those who are really responsible for turning things around happen to be us, the Malaysians themselves.

Our concern over the recent appeals for some form of royal intervention stems from an informed cynicism about the role of the royalty worldwide, and the knowledge that the differences in the respective subject-positions assumed by royals and citizens are bound to differ. It is true that there can be times when instrumental coalitions can be formed for the sake of a singular political goal; but how long can such coalitions be maintained when the class differentials and interests of the two groups can only collide in the long run?

As a counter-factual example to illustrate this point, it would pay to take a short trip back to the history of our neighbouring country, Thailand.

Some of us may recall that Thailand experienced its first democratic revolution in 1973, when the student forces of the country, working with the urban workers movement and middle-class, toppled the colonels' regime that had been installed and backed by the United States of America. (Thailand was at the time a front-line state in the war against Communism, and thus a key strategic ally to the USA. It was during this time that US intervention in Thailand was at its peak, which led to a corresponding increase of student activism directed against the military government and its

American backers.)

The King of Thailand played a crucial role in the 1973 revolution: Just when the conservative elements of the Thai elite and army were about to crush the student movement, the King opened the gates of his palace and allowed the students to seek refuge there. Protected by the King, the student revolution managed to gain strength and finally led to the election of democratic leaders like Seni Pramoj and Kukrit Pramoj. For a period of three years Thailand experimented with its democratic reform process which led to serious attempts to control the army and police as well as a public anti-corruption campaign.

However, by 1976 it became clear that the democratic revolution was not about to stop with the reform of the army and police, and would ultimately lead to the democratic reform of the whole political and economic system. It was then that the Thai business and political elite turned tails, and began to work with the more conservative elements of the Buddhist sangha. The King of Thailand was in turn persuaded to abandon the student movement, as he was warned that most of the democratic activists and reformers were Left-leaning unionists and communist sympathisers who would ultimately reduce the powers of the King as well.

Thus in 1976 the King turned a blind eye when a vicious and barbaric counter-coup was launched by the army, police, Buddhist conservatives and right-wing middle-class; leading to the storming of the campuses of Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities and the massacre of students there.

There were even reports of student leaders being executed and having their heads chopped off and mounted on the gates of the universities by right-wing thugs. Where was the benevolent King of Thailand then, whom many had applauded as the hero and saviour of democracy in 1973?

If there is a lesson to be found in all this, it is that a democratic reform process can only begin from below, and never above. Kings and Monarchs do not good democrats make, for they are the first who need to be taught the value of citizenship and civic responsibility. Furthermore any democratic reform must take into account the will of the demos- the people themselves- and give voice to the masses and not the elite.

And so it is with this painful lesson in mind that we take the recent calls for royal intervention with a bucketful of salt. Facing a government as inept, incompetent and clueless as we have at the moment is a task in itself; but it need not be made even more difficult by replacing one regime with another. In the end, the only maxim we ought to adhere to today is the clarion call of the 1940s, when Malaysians cried out: *Raja itu Rakyat, Rakyat itu Raja!* (*The King is a citizen, And the citizens are King!*)

P.S.

* Dr. Farish A. Noor is a Political Historian based at the Zentrum Moderner Orient and guest affiliated professor at Universitas Muhamadiyah Surakarta and Sunan Kalijaga Islamic University of Jogjakrata. He is also one of the founders of the www.othermalaysia.org research site.