



T-shirted turmoil

END NOTE

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A few letters on cotton clothing shouldn't provoke fear within great state machines, but sometimes they do. **Vicky Baker** looks at why slogan shirts are more than a fashion statement

YELLOW T-SHIRTS ARE a legitimate national security concern, a court in Malaysia has ruled. The decision, related specifically to shirts with a Bersih 4 slogan, came in February after a group of citizens called for a review on the government's countrywide ban of the clothing. "The home minister has effectively 'criminalised' thousands of Malaysians who wore and still own the Bersih 4 T-shirt," said campaign leaders

in a statement released shortly afterwards. "It is more than just a piece of cloth. The T-shirt represents our rights, freedom and expression."

Six months earlier, the street of Kuala Lumpur and other Malaysian cities turned yellow as they filled with protesters from Bersih 4 campaign, a nationwide protest movement for more transparent governance (Bersih meaning clean in Malay). Ahead of

Credit: EPA/Ritchie B. Tongo

a series of rallies, the home minister banned the shirts. Thousands of Malaysians defied him, and the press and social media spoke of a new-found xanthophobia, a fear of the colour yellow.

Activist Ivy Josiah, who attended the Bersih demonstration in Kuala Lumpur, said the fear initially ran both ways. She told Index that many participants turned up with their T-shirts hidden in their bags. “Once they realised no arrests were taking place, they quickly changed. Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of protesters wore the Bersih 4 T-shirts in defiance,” she said. “The government got disturbed because a people’s movement this large could upset the status quo.”

In countries where people are unable to speak freely, letting your chest do the talking is a bold step. It shows how you stand by your opinions publically and resolutely. But it comes with risks.

Two years have now passed since Egyptian student Mahmoud Hussein was arrested in Cairo, aged 18, while walking home from a peaceful commemoration of the 2011 Tahrir Square uprising. It was the wording on his T-shirt that caught the authorities’ attention: “Nation without torture”. On the back was a picture of a police officer torturing a citizen.

Hussein was jailed immediately. He’s been in prison ever since, despite not being formally charged with a crime. And he’s been tortured himself. Last year Amnesty International reported alleged electric-shock treatment to his face, testicles, back and hands.

His brother, Tarek, told Index that the state has broken its own criminal code laws by overstepping the two-year maximum for pre-trial detention. “I do not know why Mahmoud is kept locked up all this period,” he said. “The fear, in my opinion, is not from the T-shirt, but from the dream on the T-shirt: a nation without torture, a nation where nobody gets offended, a nation in which all sectors from different political ideologies and religions are respected.”

Indonesian author Eliza Vitri Handayani staged her own T-shirt protest last year after her book launch was cancelled at Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in Bali. Festival organisers had come under pressure from local police to cancel a variety of events – mostly those related to the mass killings of communist civilians and party members in 1965-66 following an attempted coup, but,

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as a police chief told CNN Indonesia, there were also concerns over sessions related to “ethnicity, religion and race”.

Handayani didn’t see her coming-of-age novel, *From Now On Everything Will Be Different*, as particularly subversive, but her event was among those struck off. Other authors in the same position responded by putting on their own fringe events in nearby cafes, but Handayani was worried she couldn’t guarantee the safety of her guests and so came up with an alternative plan. She printed five T-shirts, each carrying a different, politically critical excerpt from the novel, and she wore a different one to the festival each day.

“I wanted to promote the book and also highlight what was going on, so I thought: maybe I can wear my work?” she told Index. “It created an excuse to talk to people. I sold all the copies I took with me and I also got interviewed by the press. I hope that coverage put pressure back on to the authorities to protect citizens’ freedom of expression.”

She said she’d do it again if she needed to. She has already fashioned a dress from her book proofs, which she wore to an event in Norway. “What women wear in Indonesia is already subject to a lot of restrictions. →

OPPOSITE: Malaysian protesters march wearing yellow T-shirts with the Bersih 4 slogan during a rally in Kuala Lumpur in August 2015. The shirts, which demonstrators wore while campaigning for more governmental transparency and Prime Minister Najib Razak’s resignation, were banned by the state



ABOVE: Indonesian author Eliza Vitri Handayani wearing quotes from her novel on her T-shirt after her book launch was cancelled because of police concerns over its subject matter

→ Perhaps this a way to kill two birds with one stone?”

Footballers have also long been drawing attention to causes – from burning social issues to matters of their own egos – by lifting up their shirts to reveal a message to the crowds. The International Football Association Board formally banned statements on undershirts in 2014, ahead of the World Cup in Brazil. But this didn’t stop Russian footballer Dmitri Tarasov making a show of

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support for President Putin during a match in Turkey in February. “Most polite president” were the words emblazoned on his front; tensions between the countries have been fraught since Turkey shot down a Russian jet last November.

But can a provocative slogan transform into hate speech? This is an issue currently under debate in South Africa. In February,

a black student at University of the Witwatersrand wore a plain, white T-shirt, on which he’d scrawled, “Being black is shit” on one side and “Fuck white people” on the other. He told South Africa’s *The Times*, “I was feeling hatred because it was times of financial exclusion.” The university condemned the shirt and the student is due to appear before the South African Human Rights Commission on charges of hate speech. Since then a University of Cape Town student has been photographed in another T-shirt bearing a hand-written inscription: “Kill All Whites.”

Howard Besser, a professor of cinema studies at New York University in the USA, has been collecting slogan T-shirts since the 1980s. He estimates he has around 3,000 of them, 500 of which have been catalogued online (besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/T-Shirts/). Among recent additions is the “Hands up, don’t shoot” shirt worn during the 2014 Black Lives Matter protests, which was sparked by an unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin, being shot dead by a neighbourhood watch coordinator.

“Unlike a leaflet or an ad on TV, someone cannot fully avoid seeing the slogan on a T-shirt,” said Besser. “Slogans are quick, and if they’re clever and/or surrounded by nice colours or graphics, they can be very effective. Year-round, I average about one person per day stopping me to discuss the topic on my T-shirt. With some shirts I’ll get more than half a dozen people stopping me in a single day.”

Whether the aim of a slogan T-shirt is to shock, amuse or inspire, they are designed to be talking points. That doesn’t mean that all of them have something worthwhile to say. But for those that choose their clothing to display defiant, unspoken messages, the medium is as powerful as ever and no passing fashion will change that. ☒

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