



We Malaysians have the right to be naked and to wear short skirts

Do we have the right to wear what we want?

Take the [recent incident at Sabah](#). On May 30, 2015, ten foreign tourists stripped naked for photography on top of [Mount Kinabalu](#), Sabah. This nudity act was scandalous for two reasons. First, their act was deemed sacrilegious because Mount Kinabalu is deeply revered and sacred to Sabahan natives. Second, their nudity act was said to have angered the gods of the sacred mountain, and as a consequence, an earthquake, measuring 5.9 on the Richter scale, was sent by the gods. The earthquake claimed 18 lives, including six children, all of whom were at Mount Kinabalu at that time.



Dress code violation #1: Ten foreigners atop Mount Kinabalu, getting ready to strip naked. Their activities were believed to have caused the wrath from the gods of the sacred mountain. The wrath came in the form of an earthquake a few days later, claiming 18 lives

(photo from loyarburok.com).

Whether you believe this earthquake was caused by supernatural beings or by the movements of Earth's tectonic plates is irrelevant. It is the perceived violation and offence that these tourists had brought upon the natives of Sabah that is important. But yet, from the perspective of the ten nudists, they may think that it is their right to wear what they want (or in this case, not wear anything) and that the natives of Sabah should not impose their moral values, which the tourists have no believe in, upon them. So, who is right?

Consider a [second recent incident](#) involving Suzanna Tan and the [Road Transport Department \(RTD\)](#). On June 8, 2015, Suzanna was refused service at an RTD office because she had violated the department's dress code by wearing a skirt that did not extend below her knees, so she was made to wear a sarong before she could be served. Embarrassed and humiliated, she vented her frustrations on Facebook, and her post went viral. Suzanna's incident drew the attention from various people including that from [Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin](#), a member of the [Muslim moderates G25 group](#). Datuk Noor Farida deplored RTD's dress code (as well as that in other government agencies), saying this is an example of "the infiltration of religious conservatism into public administration".



Dress code violation #2: Suzanna Tan had to wear a sarong to cover her legs before she could be served at the RTD (Road Transport Department) office (photo from themalaymailonline.com).

The religion in question is of course Islam. The dress code at all government agencies are heavily biased towards that dictated by Islam. So, should Suzanna, being a non-Muslim, follow RTD's dress code? Like the case for the nudists at Mount Kinabalu, does Suzanna have a right to dress how she likes?

Whether we realize it or not, we all have conformed to some form of dress code. What we wear is dictated by social norms, culture, and for those who are religious, religion.

But at the same time, we have the right to dress in whatever way we want. We have the right to be naked on the top of any mountain, sacred or not, or appear even in a bikini at the RTD's office. No one can refuse to recognize us simply on the basis that we dress differently from that expected.

Consider, for instance, the male natives of [Papua New Guinea \(PNG\)](#). One traditional wear of the men there is [koteka or penis sheath](#) which they wear over their genitals. To them, wearing the koteka is part of their identity and culture. It would take a very brave person to tell them otherwise.

A PNG man, wearing a koteka, would probably be deemed offensive if he walked up Mount Kinabalu or entered an RTD office, but to him, he is acting perfectly normal according to his culture. He has all the rights to wear his koteka wherever he goes even if his attire is regarded inappropriate to others. Who are we to tell people of another culture that their culture is wrong or incompatible?

So, what we have here is a conflict of moral values, where the values of one group of people are being imposed on others. The natives of Sabah are imposing their moral values on others, dictating how people should behave on the sacred mountain. And in the case of RTD (as well as other government agencies), the moral values of Islam are imposed on others such that they dictate how and what people should wear.

How then do we resolve conflict of moral values? Although we each have the right to dress how we want, this does not mean we have to express this right all the time. We need to consider very carefully if expressing our right to dress would unnecessarily cause conflict with other groups of people who do not share our moral values.

So, yes, the ten nudists on top of Mount Kinabalu have the right to be naked, but

they should have considered if stripping naked just for the sake of having the ultimate group selfie is more important than the sentiments of the local natives. Just as people would not strip in a mosque, temple, or church, these ten tourists should not have been naked on a mountain considered sacred by Sabahans.

Many people, including these Sabahan natives, identify themselves through their religion, so for anyone to disrepute that would exacerbate group conflicts. Complying with the dress code (by not being naked, for instance) on Mount Kinabalu is not about comprising your rights or moral values, but it is about recognizing differences exist and yet showing respect to these differences.

But the Islamic-based dress code imposed by RTD is a different case. Are RTD offices somehow sacred grounds to Muslims? If not, why Islamic-based dress code? Why not base a dress code on, say, traditional Chinese wear? Or better still, for the sake of national unity, RTD can rotate on a per monthly basis dress codes based on Malay, Chinese, Indian, Sabahan, then Sarawakian culture? That would certainly be innovative, perhaps even fun.



Malaysian unity only comes when differences between peoples are respected, not removed (photo from thestar.com.my).

If Malaysia is to be progressive, we need to create a common platform upon which all Malaysians from all culture, religions, and beliefs can come and work together to achieve a higher goal that transcends each group's interests. Yes, we each have rights, but that right needs to be exercised in view of respecting, not removing, the differences between us.