month to reject the appeal of an Islamic preacher and political activist sentenced to nine months in prison for insulting the Sultan of Selangor, one of the nine monarchs who take turns as Malaysia’s head of state. Instead the activist’s sentence was increased to a year. The government points out that he was originally charged and sentenced, and his appeal lodged, while UMNO was still in power. But democracy advocates do not understand how a government supposedly determined to repeal the Sedition Act can sit by while such abuses continue. Mahathir Mohamad, the current prime minister, insists that change is at hand. “We are in the midst of structuring the new law and it will be concluded as soon as possible,” he declared on July 27th.

But Dr Mahathir may be part of the problem. He is a former UMNO leader who unsustainably used many of the repressive laws that PH is supposed to be repealing during a previous stint as prime minister. More generally, the government is an awkward mix of long-time opposition activists and defectors from UMNO, such as Dr Mahathir, who were put off more by Mr Najib’s alleged corruption than by his authoritarian ways.

Then there are Malaysia’s racial politics. The government was forced to abandon plans to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, an UN-sponsored treaty, after objections from Malays, the country’s biggest ethnic group, who feared this might threaten the many affirmative-action schemes that favour them and discriminate against other groups. The opposition has painted many of the government’s reforms as harmful to Malays or contrary to Islam (the religion of most Malays)—charges flandering ministers, many of whom are neither Malay nor Muslim, lack the confidence to rebut forcefully.

Perhaps the biggest problem is that voters, and thus the government, are more interested in other subjects, most notably the economy. Repealing a hated goods-and-services tax was among PH’s first moves upon taking power. “I don’t think human rights is a real top priority,” admits one activist working with the government.

As voters tire of the government, however, reforms will become harder to enact. “If you don’t do it off the bat when you come into power I’m not sure it will ever get done,” says Ambiga Sreenevasan, a prominent lawyer investigating sedition by Mr Najib’s government. Malaysians voted for a coalition that loudly and explicitly espoused liberal values—but that may not have been why they voted. In the meantime, the state retains the power to repress their views. One of Zunar’s drawings captures the situation well. In it the stripes of Malaysia’s flag become bars behind which people are imprisoned.

Afghan weddings

Hall change

KABUL

Marble, fountains, all the Red Bull you can drink and 5,000 parking places

The Isteqlal wedding hall in Kabul, Afghanistan’s mountain-fringed capital, is quite a sight, at least at night. The red hangar-like structure is lit up by thousands of multi-coloured lights, which make the building glow like a casino. Inside, chandeliers and silk drapes hang from the ceiling, which is lit with blue and pink lights. The floors are all marble.

Such opulence is necessary if you want people to get married in your hall, explains Ahmad Fawal Sharifi, the manager, from behind a thick wooden desk on which sits a large green globe. “The most important thing is the looks and the lights,” he says. After that comes the size of the car park. Isteqlal can hold 5,000 cars. Inside, there is space for 8,000 guests, with enough separate chambers to conduct five simultaneous weddings, each with segregated sections for men and women.

Kabul has dozens of wedding halls, mainly clustered along the road from the airport. Most have a similar style to the Isteqlal. In addition to dramatic lighting, plastic- clad turrets and tree-shaped fountains are popular. Some American soldiers, only seeing the road from helicopters, have been known to compare it to the Las Vegas Strip, though Elvis is unlikely to officiate at an Afghan wedding. From April to September the halls host weddings every day.

Wedding halls in Afghanistan date back at least a century, but the modern neon-and-crystal sort is a recent invention: before 2001 the puritanical Taliban regime banned such excess. The business boomed under Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan’s president from 2004 to 2014. But as the number of NATO troops in the country has fallen from 130,000 to 17,000 in recent years, the amount of money sloshing around has plunged, since fewer troops need fewer kebabs, laundry services and supply roads. Cash-strapped Afghans are now cutting back on ostentatious weddings.

“When we opened, we enjoyed great business,” says Mr Sharifi. But now it is not always as easy to fill up every hall. And costs, like the lights, remain undimmed. Running generators can burn over 1,000 litres of diesel a night. Hundreds of staff are involved: not just caterers and musicians, but dozens of armed security guards, since wedding halls are vulnerable to attacks by jihadis. In November a suicide-bomber killed 50 people at a gathering of clerics hosted at a wedding hall. That does rather put people off, admits Ahmad Azimie, the manager of the Arg wedding hall.

A typical ceremony, with perhaps 1,000 guests, plentiful food and at least two cans of Red Bull per person, might set a groom’s family back $9,000, in a country where annual GDP per person is around $520. Many Afghans complain about being asked to defray distant relatives’ wedding costs. Grooms’ families complain about being expected to host thousands of guests. Many families are taking on debt. “It is sad for me, but as a businessman, this is where my profits come from,” says Mr Sharifi.

Competition is fierce for the remaining customers. Many are from the diaspora. At the Arg, Azhar, a young Afghan-Canadian who drives forklift trucks for a living halfway around the world, is examining halls with his mother. At his wedding, he insists, “Everything must be perfect. I don’t care about money, I am looking to my future.” Such bravura—and deep pockets—are in dwindling supply.