‘Orwellian' state of an island nation

By Prashant Singh and Meghna Sharma, April 23, 2019

There are several harrowing facets to Brunei’s administration that resemble a backslide into archaic intolerance. The new stoning law is one among them’

In his book, 1984, George Orwell narrated a claustrophobic tale of a dystopian and totalitarian society through the eyes of his protagonist Winston Smith. Though the book was written over 70 years ago, it seems more relevant today than ever. No wonder, the sales of this book has seen a significant surge around the world lately. Renewed interest in dystopian literature has emerged primarily because it serves to remind us to look out for signs around us that have the potential to bring out the fictional hell into life.

Early this month, Brunei, a small island state, became the centre of attention as it introduced a Sharia’h law at the national level that makes gay sex and adultery punishable by stoning to death. The Sultan of Brunei had announced these changes in 2014 but amendments came into effect only this year. Since these changes go against the decades of progress made under the international human rights law, this move has drawn fierce condemnation from the global community. The Human Rights Watch has characterised this law to be “barbaric to the core.” Regardless of growing international pressure from all quarters, including the UN, the country has no plans to halt the implementation of these laws. In this context, the themes discussed by Orwell have regained relevance, courtesy the totalitarian regime of Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

The ministry of love in Brunei: The Sultan’s aim is to transform Brunei into the same ‘Orwellian’ state as described in 1984. It isn’t surprising, therefore, that he described these amendments as a “great achievement.” Parallels do not, however, end here. The “big brother” in Brunei exercises complete authority over public and private life of the individual. Sexual autonomy is not the only sphere of private life that is controlled here. The same penal
punishment is also provided for adultery, abortion and alcohol consumption. The harsh forms of punishment, apart from death of stoning, include amputation of limbs and flogging. While homosexuality is being decriminalised in several nations, Brunei has managed to enter the league of those states that consider it to be a capital offence. The state of Brunei or rather, the monarch of Brunei, has not just retained death penalty but ensured that it is provided in the most cruel and vicious way — death by stoning.

Thought control: Another major theme from 1984, which has found a second wave in Brunei, is through control. While the recent amendments have generated outrage across the international level, the people of Brunei are strangely silent about the entire episode. The Sultan has maintained a firm grip over the media and its right to free speech. Thus, any medium through which such criticism can be manifested is curbed. Quratul-Ain Baidul, in Brunei Times, said that although there is no censorship body in Brunei, the extent of self-censorship is such that everybody is afraid of overstepping their line. Journalists have become mere stenographers at the hands of the Government. While traditional media has ceded space for dissent, critics have turned to the Internet and social media. Anticipating these changes, the Government has planned to regulate online speech as well. The imposition of the current penal code was also preceded by a warning that online critics will be dealt with harshly once it is implemented.

Much like the “Orwellian” state of Oceania, Brunei’s Sultan insists on presenting his own reality. While the Sultan “does not expect other people to accept and agree with it, but it would suffice if they just respect the nation in the same way that it also respects them.” The recent changes giving effect to harsh penalties are part of the Sultan’s effort to impose conservative Islam in the country based on the restrictive interpretations of Sharia’h. Amnesty Journal reported that the proposed amendment seeks to impose further restrictions on women, like making it mandatory for them to stay at their guardian’s house till marriage.

There are many other harrowing facets to Brunei’s administration that resemble the ‘Orwellian’ state. The Government has also arrogated the power to ban any religious practice it considers “deviant” to Sharia’h principles. It does not allow workers to strike or participate in collective bargaining. Child marriage over 14 years of age is allowed. No civil society organisation in Brunei is allowed to raise concerns about human rights violations. As per the
Human Rights Report 2018 released by the US Government, every humanitarian organisation here is required to work directly under the Government. Similar to the Orwellian dictator, the big brother, Hassanal Bolkiah has sweeping powers and continues to rule Brunei since 1961. Unfortunately, there is no end in sight. He has been able to assuage discontent among people with free healthcare and education, zero taxes and free housing. For the sake of the people in Brunei, one can only hope that this backslide into archaic intolerance doesn’t go unnoticed and the bleakness of the Sultan’s dystopia gets exposed.

Prashant Singh is research fellow and Meghna Sharma is research intern at the Centre for Human Rights Studies, OP Jindal Global University.