Amateur Videos Are Putting Official Abuse in New Light

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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia -- "Do your squat! Do your squat!" the policewoman barked. "Arms up!"

The 22-year-old babysitter, Hemy Hamisa Abu Hassan Saari, had already been forced to strip naked. Now she was being ordered to squat up and down, over and over, keeping her elbows away from her body and holding her earlobes.

"I cried. I was scared. I was ashamed," Hemy said in an interview, recalling what had happened on the night of June 29, 2005. She had just been arrested for drug possession. She had no drugs, her attorney said, but police found some on a friend of her fiance. Police arrested the whole group anyway.

"Do I really have to do this?" Hemy, who had never been arrested before, pleaded with the female officer standing in front of her in a tiny police station locker room.

She said her head was pounding from the humiliation and she feared what might come next. But what was happening at that moment changed her life: A male officer was secretly holding his cellphone and its tiny camera between the bars on the window, making a video clip that would ultimately expose more than Hemy's nakedness.

The clip began circulating phone to phone, e-mail to e-mail. Eventually it was posted on YouTube and other Internet sites, to be viewed by millions. What started as cheap voyeurism escalated into an unstoppable cyberspace phenomenon, which forced the prime minister to establish an official inquiry that led to changes in police practice. The episode also underscored the growing power of amateur video, shot on cellphones and ever-tinier digital cameras, to hold the powerful to account.

The digital revolution is helping to throw light into some of the world's darkest corners. The photos of naked and shackled Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison -- images taken on soldiers' personal digital cameras and made public in 2004 -- focused a global spotlight on abuses there. Ordinary people going about their daily lives are now the first to document historic events.

Vacationers with cellphones and cameras recorded the first images of the December 2004 Asian tsunami. London commuters provided cellphone photos that Scotland Yard used to investigate the July 2005 bombings on the transit system. Cellphone images were among the first glimpses of the recent coup in Thailand, and they were the only way anyone would have ever known what happened to Hemy in a Kuala Lumpur police lockup.

The Power of Images
"Images have more resonance," said Gillian Caldwell, executive director of Witness, a New York-based human rights group whose credo is "See it. Film It. Change it." Her group has already gathered almost 3,000 hours of footage of human rights abuses from people in more than 75 countries. It is getting ready to launch a YouTube-like Web site for human rights. Caldwell said rights groups are increasingly harnessing the "power of images and human stories to motivate change."

Female detainees had complained for years that Malaysian police humiliated them by ordering nude squats, ostensibly to dislodge anything they might be hiding on or inside their bodies. Even women arrested on minor traffic violations complained of this inappropriate treatment.

Human rights groups protested, but nothing changed, they said. It was hard to get word out about any police misconduct, they said, because newspapers and television stations that require annual government licenses rarely carried unflattering stories about the police. In a nation where the same political party has led the government since 1957, authorities silenced critics.

Then the nude squat video became public and shattered the old balance of power.

The male officer had asked a phone technician to transfer the contents of his cellphone's memory card -- including the video of Hemy -- from his phone to his laptop computer. It is unclear whether the officer or the technician started it, but soon footage of Hemy squatting naked inside the police station was seen on cellphone and computer screens from one end of this Southeast Asian country to the other -- and far beyond.

Last Nov. 23, Teresa Kok, a member of Parliament from the opposition Democratic Action Party, saw it on a friend's phone.

"The next day I called a press conference," Kok said. "Everybody was shocked."

In Malaysia, a tropical country of 25 million, the number of cellphone subscribers has risen to about 20 million from just 5 million in 2000. As in other Asian countries, the phone models here are particularly advanced; people don't use them only for voice calls, but to record, for example, a toddler's first steps and then transmit the images to a grandparent's phone.

In the 1990s, Mahathir Mohamad, then prime minister, promised he would not censor the Internet. Mahathir, leader for 22 years and fond of grandiose projects such as the construction of the Petronas Towers, the world's tallest twin towers, wanted to steer billions into the Multimedia Super Corridor, an information and communications technology hub designed to rival Silicon Valley.

Now, as more criticism of the government and more homemade videos of police misconduct are posted online, authorities are contending with a new force. Earlier this year, for example, there was a news blackout in the mainstream newspapers and TV stations of protests over oil price increases, said Steven Gan, editor of Malaysiakini.com, an increasingly popular independent online news service. But photos and video of police smashing protesters with red batons appeared almost instantly online.

"The government can't collect everyone's phone" said Gan, who posted the nude squat video and graphic pictures of a bloodied demonstrator on his Web site. "This has opened more democratic space."

**Fighting the System**
Five-foot-three and visibly anxious, Hemy sat in a quiet law office in Kuala Lumpur, a capital with glitzy modern buildings and strict rules. Signs warn against playing music or chewing gum on the subway. Most woman in this predominantly Muslim country wear scarves covering their heads.

At the end of November, five months after her arrest, Hemy had married her fiance and was trying to put the six miserable nights she spent in police custody behind her. Then she saw herself, naked and squatting, on the television news.

"That's me! That's me!" she recalled telling her husband, wondering how she had been videotaped.

In a soft voice, frequently casting her eyes to the ground, she said her husband at first didn't believe that the woman in the video, the one millions were viewing, was his new wife. The segment broadcast on TV showed a woman's bare back, the detainee bending up and down in front of a female officer. Hemy pointed out the distinctive black-and-white hair band holding her long black hair in a ponytail.

On the tape, she could hear faint prayers from the Koran being recited -- the same verses she had heard coming from a nearby mosque when she was in the police lockup June 29.

"I was surprised and angry and embarrassed all over again," she said. "Our culture doesn't allow this."

With a pink scarf wrapped around her head, hiding her black hair and framing her round face, she looked even younger than 23. She said that at one point she felt so shamed she wanted to die.

She panicked at the thought of what would happen to her when her friends, neighbors and relatives figured out she was the naked woman. She called a lawyer for advice.

"She had nowhere else to go," said Baljit Singh Sidhu, a well-known criminal lawyer in Kuala Lumpur representing her. Though Hemy is "not street-smart at all," he said, she had a "spark, an anger, something in her" that made her willing to fight the system.

After Kok, the opposition legislator, had played the video in the Parliament building for government officials, the scandal had gotten so big that it was playing on mainstream TV stations.

**International Impact**

It created a stir in China, too. Because Hemy has light skin, many who saw the video mistakenly believed she was Chinese; about 25 percent of Malaysia's population is ethnic Chinese. On Chinese Web sites, some called for a boycott of Malaysia.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, alarmed at the possibility of losing Chinese tourism, sent government officials to Beijing to apologize. He also took another extraordinary step: He ordered an official high-level inquiry into the scandal.

"It was quite a change" for the government to react, said Kok. Officials had been unresponsive to a Chinese woman's recent complaints that she, too, had been forced to do naked squats. Kok said this woman had been erroneously arrested on the charge of having a false passport and kept five days in jail. The difference was the existence of the video evidence in Hemy's case, she said.

After calling 16 witnesses, the special commission announced in January that Hemy's treatment was
"tantamount to inhuman and degrading treatment," and a violation of human rights.

An Islamic scholar had testified about the particular importance to Muslims of keeping the body covered to protect dignity. A medical doctor said squatting is not an effective method of detecting something hidden internally. According to other testimony, body searches do not require complete nudity and should be used only in cases of "reasonable suspicion" -- for example, if the person was acting suspiciously, had a criminal history and was being charged with a serious crime.

The inquiry also found "a lack of transparency and accountability of the police" and recommended an immediate change in police procedure.

Baljit, the attorney, said that without the video "there would be no case," no commission, no new law to change this police practice.

Hemy, who recently became a mother, said she views the video two ways. "Of course it brought me shame," she said, "but it is good because it brought this to light."

The male officer who recorded Hemy, identified during the government inquiry as Mohamad Dzulfatah, "is in the process of dismissal," according to a police spokesman. He said that the female officer was "following instructions" and remains on duty but that police station "procedures have changed."

The police are now trying to turn the technology to their own advantage: They are asking citizens to send digital images of traffic violators, double-parkers and people who otherwise add to this city's monumental traffic jams.

Hemy's drug possession case has yet to go to trial, but her lawyer said no drugs were ever found on her. She is suing the police for negligence and seeking damages of about $2.7 million.

Yap Swee Seng, executive director of Suaram, a human rights group, said Hemy has a strong case -- one that shows how the common cellphone has shifted power to ordinary citizens.

"Five years ago this would have been totally impossible," he said.

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