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May God shield us from Torquemadas

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FOR any newspaper, a measure of its credibility is the support it obtains for causes which it espouses in involving matters humanitarian, environmental or those affecting civil rights and issues political.

One example was the positive response gained from the public by this newspaper in its campaign to protect Taiping Hill, the Seremban Lake Garden and the Tanjong Tuan bird sanctuary from developmental depredations. In the end, all three are preserved.

Meanwhile, generous donations were received by another paper from the public to help famine victims in North Korea.

Matters political, however, are more contentious. For every newspaper is the old saw: you win some, you lose some. The recent mid-term elections in the United States yet again provide lessons for all.

A big loser was Newt Gingrich, the Republican House of Representatives Speaker who has since announced his resignation. He had endorsed the party's advertising blitz about President Bill Clinton's ties with Monica Lewinsky. It is now acknowledged to be a strategic blunder.

Another loser curiously enough was one who didn't contest the election, Kenneth Starr, the independent counsel investigating the matter. His 445-page report had been published and so was the president's own testimony after which came criticisms by American newspapers.

Richard Cohen of the Washington Post now writes: "Recall those days - a seemingly endless list of newspapers and commentators calling for Clinton's resignation. He, his party and maybe even his dog, would be put to sleep."

The winner, he concluded is "common sense and common decency. The loser - big! - is Ken Starr. Please, someone let him know".

Revealing too is Cohen's reference to some fellow-journalists as when he writes of "a Washington Press corps that includes too many junior Torquemadas, that have not been able to turn the president's smarmy private life into a political debacle."

Take note of the name Torquemada (1420-1498), the Spanish inquisitor whose name is synonymous with religious bigotry and cruel fanaticism. Comes then the question: if their own president is a target would not others too be fair game?

Torquemadas are not the only ones out there.

Others manifest haughtiness and arrogance as when the New York Times in its editorial, "Malaysia on Trial" makes the strident call: "Malaysia will be host to a Pacific economic summit meeting in two weeks. President Clinton and other Asian leaders can make a powerful statement by asking to see Anwar in jail, and visiting his wife."

There speaks the voice of hegemony. It is not the sort of statement which a Chinese newspaper would ever, ever make to the country's President Jiang Zemin or the Mainichi Shimbun make to Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi.

One doubts whether the paper's leader writer has visited Malaysia when he writes about a "subservient judiciary".

Questions abound: what about the minister who was sentenced to death on the charge of murder and the Menteri Besar sent to jail on charges of corruption?

Or the decision which declared Umno to be illegal was made during Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's prime ministership? Are those the decision of a

subservient judiciary?

Welcomed, by the way, by Arabs and other countries supportive of the Palestine Liberation Organisation was the defeat of Alfonso D' Amato, long-time Republican senator from New York.

Visitors to New York have long noted that when Asian, African and Latin-American leaders speak in the United Nations General Assembly their speeches are rarely given coverage in the New York Times. And yet, on its frontpage is the slogan: "All the news fit to print."

The fact that the electorate gave President Clinton a reprieve despite strong and persistent criticism in various US newspapers does not speak well of their appeal.

As it was, the Blacks and Hispanic voters were reported to be hostile to the attempts to put down President Clinton. They were said to have mobilised against the Republicans.

Proved again is that opinion polls before elections are not totally reliable and that coverage of elections is not just a matter of reporting speeches delivered or things done.

Still remembered was the 1948 US presidential election. Almost all, including the Gallup poll, the Washington Post and other newspapers predicted the victory of Republican candidate Thomas Dewey over President Harry S. Truman. The Chicago Tribune went so far as to publish on the frontpage in its early edition "Dewey Wins". But Truman won.

The next election to watch then is in Indonesia in May 1999. It'll be interesting to see how the country's newspapers, around 150 dailies, will support or oppose the various parties during the hustings.

Among prominent papers to watch would be the Catholic Kompas, established in 1965, one of the highest-selling newspapers in Southeast Asia. Another is the Protestant Sinar Pembaruan, set up on 1987 to replace the banned Sinar Harapan.

Yet another paper to watch would be Republika, the pro-Muslim daily associated with Indonesian President B.J. Habibie and the Association of Islamic Intellectuals.

Noted would be their coverage of speeches and actions initiated by Dr Amien Rais, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Akbar Tanjung of Golkar, Abdurrahman Wahid, head of the 30-million-strong Nahdatul Ulama and others.

There is also Pos Kota, the down-market daily established by Harmoko, former Indonesian Information Minister and now Speaker of the Indonesian Parliament.

Which leader speaks for the governed? As said by the proverbial wise owl, "Of all the qualifications to be a leader, few are more important than the ability to express effectively the feelings, the ideals, the goals of the governed."

It would not do to be rhetorical to win paeans of praise from Chris Patten, the last Governor of Hong Kong with his anti-China stance or to please the International Monetary Fund masters. Or, for that matter, to please foreign political masters.

May God shield us from the Torquemadas and others.

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