

21/04/2000

Tribune's blatant hypocrisy

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THE juxtaposition could not have been more stark. The hypocrisy could not have been more cutting. In one single edition, the International Herald Tribune exposed itself to be the obdurate and enthusiastic spin sheet for the "Washington consensus" - crudely summed up as free men, free markets - while at the same time confirming its paltry understanding of issues in Malaysia.

The international media was caught in a quandary of sorts. There were two demonstrations last weekend - one in Washington DC and the other in Kuala Lumpur.

The latter, as we know, fizzled out due to preventive measures taken by the Malaysian police.

The former erupted in running street fights between the ragtag band of anti-globalisation "lefties" and the Washington city police who resorted to using force.

The Tribune extricated itself from its editorial predicament by playing down the Washington protests in its Monday edition and according the Malaysian demonstrations front-page coverage in the form of a picture of perennial street fighter and later Parti Keadilan Nasional vice-president Tian Chua being arrested with the caption "Crackdown on pro-Anwar rally".

Never mind that the number of protesters arrested in Kuala Lumpur at the so-called "Black 14" gathering amounted to 48, albeit not including the seven leaders swooped up before and after the event. Compare this to reports of between 700 and 1,300 arrests made in Washington over the space of three days. Certainly if there was a crackdown, it was not in Kuala Lumpur.

As if the slant of the news coverage was not enough, the enterprising op-ed editor at the Tribune decided to ram home the message by printing an editorial from the Washington Post (the parent company of the Tribune) entitled "The protests are wrong".

Do not let the title mislead you into thinking that it chastised the protesters both in Kuala Lumpur and Washington - it was only aimed at the latter. The editorial was pure Washington consensus: brazen, direct, misguided and skewed. It claimed, inter alia, that "when thousands take to the streets to demand the abolition of these institutions, it is time to put aside the nuances and say bluntly:

"The billions struggling to leave poverty are much, much better off with the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank and the open-trading system than they could possibly be without."

It carries on saying that, "The protest leaders deride the export-based development model promoted by the IMF and the World Bank as 'trickle-down economics', an epithet intended to suggest that only elites and corporations reap benefits. But this development model has recently produced the largest and most rapid reduction of poverty in history."

It concludes with a thundering derision of the "backward" street protesters who would do well to celebrate globalisation instead of "attacking it".

Such a simplistic, cut and dry deification of these multilateral institutions - themselves wedded to the Washington consensus - ignores the plethora of wrong calls and misjudgments made.

Malaysia, for one, laid bare the careless policy prescriptions of the IMF in responding to the Asian financial crisis. If, as the editorial

states, these institutions are benevolent facilitators of eradication of poverty and human development, what are we to make of the high social costs paralysing countries that sought IMF help - South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia?

What are we to make of the fact that IMF loans to these countries were dished out to enable the repayments of dollar-denominated loans to foreign banks that performed inadequate risk assessments pre-crisis? What are we to make of the structural adjustment policies imposed on the poorest African countries that continue to take loans and aid to pay the interest on previous loans?

Never mind the Washington consensus and just concentrate on the spin. What the editorial did was to ridicule the protests and condone police brutality by saying, simply, that the protests were wrong. Wrong in the sense that the premise of the protests, to wit "globalisation is bad", is based on a fallacy.

In which case, what was sorely missing on the op-ed of the Tribune was that second editorial which could have been titled "The Protests Are Wrong 2", deriding the efforts of a segment of the Malaysian opposition to stage ill-conceived protests.

Instead, the mere news coverage of the Kuala Lumpur demonstrations provided for the usual insinuations: opposition democracy-activists in a faraway tin pot dictatorship assaulted and beaten by baton-wielding police; democratic rights of citizens trampled upon ruthlessly; the perpetuation of a nasty police state where no one is safe and no one free.

The slant was all the more necessary because the demonstration was about a Washington consensus darling, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The tired and oft-repeated skewed criticism of certain foreign newspapers is never tempered by explanations or rationalisations such as the editorial that poured scorn on the Washington demonstrators.

No attempt was made to explain that the protests in Kuala Lumpur were illegal or that Parliament has constitutionally limited the right of citizens to assemble in the interest of public order and security - an important legislative safeguard in a multiracial country.

No attempt was made to explain that the objective of these so-called democrats was to seek royal intervention to censure a democratically elected Government.

No attempt was made to explain that the demonstrators represented a minority of the population and a sliver of the opposition.

No attempt was made to explain that the mass mobilisation for justice and democracy that the planners plotted was, in fact, a gathering to commemorate one man's political downfall.

No attempt was made to explain that the grouses of these demonstrators were based on an irrational and emotional interpretation of current political developments.

No attempt was made to explain that police acted professionally and pre-emptively in the interest of public security. No attempt was made by the Tribune to "put aside the nuances and say bluntly": The protest in Kuala Lumpur was wrong.

It was, perhaps, with this realisation that many of the senior opposition members shied away from the protest. Many of them probably saw through the seemingly altruistic motives behind the demonstration.

Ezam Mohd Noor, Keadilan's Youth chief, went out of his way to explain that it was a people's movement against the rule of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Unfortunately, even fellow opposition leader, Dr Chandra Muzaffar, conceded that it was all about Anwar.

When given the chance to debate the issue in Parliament on Monday, Pas Youth chief Mahfuz Omar disrupted the Deputy Home Minister's reply by

recounting his own incarceration in the 1980s instead of addressing the issue of "Black 14".

It is clear that the demonstration did not have the backing of the entire Alternative Front leadership.

None of this, of course, matters to the Tribune. It does not matter that the protests were prevented to prevent the repetition of riots and violence (as seen in 1998) that could have disrupted Malaysia's economic development and racial harmony.

It does not matter that the majority of the Malaysian people spoke loud and clear at the last general election by returning Barisan Nasional with a two-thirds majority.

And to use its own argument, it does not matter that most Malaysians are happy with the BN model of development that has seen massive eradication of poverty, sustained economic and human development and social stability.

Instead of atoning for the sins of its one-sided Monday edition, the Tribune confirmed beyond doubt the next day that it is blinkered past repair. The follow-up article on the Washington protests where tear gas and pepper spray were used reported the praises traded by the Washington police and the protesters for each other's "organisation and restraint".

In stark contrast, the follow-up on Malaysia was simply titled "Malaysia extends crackdown". The message was yet again brazen, direct, misguided and skewed. Pure Washington consensus.