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Missing my nemesis

A Kadir Jasin

THIS ONE is for I, the Joker the Extremely Great Teadrinker.

Wherever you are, I wish you a Happy New Year. Belated it may be, but this greeting means a lot to me.

I was away in my little hometown in Kedah during the New Year. Away from the excitement of the KLCC and Selangor Padang countdown, the New Year came quietly and without fanfare.

Only the half moon, the clear blue skies of the northern dry season - the musim timur -and countless stars to keep you company. Of course, there was the continuous chatter of the nightjars, crickets and an assortment of other night creatures.

During that contemplative moment, it dawned upon me that I have not heard from you for a very long time, to be exact, for nearly a year.

I hope you are well. That I have not received your familiar letters does not bode ill. I like to believe that you no longer write to me because I no longer write the 'Other Thots' column in the New Sunday Times.

You are, by far, the most critical and certainly the most loyal reader of the column.

For the nine over years that it appeared weekly, you almost never failed to correspond with me to express your anger and your deep dislike for my point of view.

In a way, I miss being called all those names - the likes of toady, apple polisher, Mahathir's lackey and others that, for reasons of propriety, I cannot mention - by you.

You were angry with me, I believe, not so much for my opinion on things but rather because you disliked Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he was Prime Minister.

It would seem that whoever is appointed to the highest editorial post in The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Bhd (NSTP) would incur your wrath. In your letter, which I received on Feb 14, 2003, you called my successor, Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, Dr Mahathir's toady-in-chief.

Perhaps, in part, due to your curses, his contract with the NSTP was prematurely terminated less than a year after you conferred him that title.

I have always considered readers' views as important. Without readers, newspapers and magazines are nothing.

OF THE LALANG AND HUMAN BEINGS

YOU have very strong views on the Internal Security Act and 1987's Operasi Lalang. You objected to both.

You were an ardent defender of Tun Salleh Abbas, who was removed as Lord President in 1988. You called his sacking a black day for justice.

I have, on the other hand, been a defender of the ISA for as long as I have been a journalist. That is 34 years, a fairly long time, considering that the Act came into being in 1948 under the British rule.

But looking back and benefiting from the wisdom of age, if I can put it that way, I think you were not altogether wrong in your objection to the Act and to Operasi Lalang.

Now, I am beginning to wonder why should the police have chosen such a derogatory title as Operasi Lalang when using the Act then. They could have come up with a more sopan (polite) name for their action.

Surely, not everybody who was detained in the operation was a lalang? To those of you who are unfamiliar with the Malaysian scene, the lalang is

a variety of grass that is generally considered a pest by farmers. So, they would use everything at their disposal to destroy it, including the potent weed killer paraquat.

Incidentally, it is also the favourite poison for estate people who choose to take their own lives and the lives of the people they think they love. Funny how some people think their loved ones would want to die with them.

Yet the lalang, variously known as satintail, blady grass and cogon grass and scientifically as *imperata cylindrica*, is the hardiest and the most prolific of all grass species and is very useful for preventing soil erosion. Where no other variety of plants can grow, the lalang flourishes.

The same applies to human society. Even the most strident and the least conforming of its members have a role to play, provided they are not militant or subversive.

Thus, the continued application of the ISA and the methods used by the police can become one of the many aspects of police work that should come under the purview of the proposed Royal Commission announced by the Government recently.

I am sure I, the Joker the Extremely Great Teadrinker is in full support of the move by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to form the Royal Commission to look into the police force.

It is certainly the most significant decision taken by Abdullah since he took over the reins on Oct 31. Congratulations to Pak Lah for the bold move.

The media and the public in general have, for many years now, been talking about the falling quality of law and order management and the rising allegations of corruption against members of the police force.

Of course, there will be enough people asking why now? After all, Abdullah had been responsible for the police in his capacity as Home Affairs Minister in Tun Dr Mahathir's Government for quite a while.

But as the saying goes, it's better late than never.

SECRET IDENTITY

LIKE many readers of the New Sunday Times newspaper, I, the Joker the Extremely Great Teadrinker may not realise that 'Other Thots' has reappeared, albeit modestly, in Malaysian Business magazine.

It is also possible that his letters have been undelivered. Despite my having left the employment of the NSTP more than three years ago, many readers still associate me with the company. I can't blame them. I was there for almost 25 years.

I, the Joker the Extremely Great Teadrinker, for one, continued to mail his letters to me to the NSTP. His February 2003 letter was addressed to 'Abdul Kadir Jasin c/o Abdullah Ahmad'.

In that letter, he confessed that he was a confirmed bachelor. There is nothing wrong in this. He said his view of life, including his decision to remain unmarried, was greatly influenced by the cruelty inflicted by the Japanese soldiers on his family and close friends during the Second World War.

I too have a confession to make. It concerns the mystery of his identity.

I, the Joker, the Extremely Great Teadrinker has never revealed his identity and I too have never insisted on him making it known. I broke the general rule of not entertaining anonymous correspondence because, from the very start, I found his reaction to the column to be untypical and often refreshing.

He seemed to disagree with literally everything I wrote and yet week in week out he read it and, more often than not, had something to say in return. There are not that many people like him anymore - individuals who

are willing to stand up for their rights come what may.

Today, even among the liberal educated young people - the Ivy League-types - there is a tendency to exclude and sideline people who do not share their pedigree, thinking and familiarity. This is happening even in party politics.

Three or four Christmases ago, I almost had the identity of I, the Joker, the Extremely Great Teadrinker exposed. A senior writer at The New Straits Times, Theresa Manavalan, who was familiar with his letters and his unique handwriting, told me that she had seen a Christmas card bearing a similar handwriting at a relative's house in Bangsar.

She was acutely familiar with his handwriting and his thoughts because, on many occasions, she had helped me analyse letters sent to me in response to the 'Other Thots' column.

But I decided against it. His anonymity gave our correspondence an air of mystery.

So, I, the Joker, the Extremely Great Teadrinker, if you happen to read this column or hear about it, let me once again wish you a Happy New Year and pray that you are in good health.

In this great country of ours, we are never very far from celebrating New Year. We can wish each other Happy New Year throughout the year. On Jan 22, we will be celebrating the Chinese lunar New Year. Then on Feb 22, the Muslim New Year, the beginning of Muharam. March 21 is the Hindu New Year, the Bikrami Samvat, April 14 the Sikh New Year, the Vaisaki and on May 26 we welcome the Buddhist New Year, the Buddha Purnima or Buddha Jayanti. Some Hindus also celebrate Deepavali as the Diwali New Year.

Ah ... this is Malaysia.

PAK LAH, THE PEOPLE PERSON

BACK to the Prime Minister. Let me, at the risk of being accused of indulging in presumption, say that he hasn't changed. He is still Pak Lah the 'nice man'.

Getting to meet him these days is a privilege. When you are no longer a newspaper editor, you have to line-up like most other rakyat to see the Prime Minister. You cannot call out 'Pak Lah' over the heads of other people in a meeting or at a gathering. You must maintain propriety and respect.

Except for a slight miscommunication about the time of the meeting, the half-an-hour chat with 'The Man' was as pleasant as ever. Instead of sitting at the Prime Minister's gigantic table, he insisted that we sit at the oval conference table at the opposite end of the room.

But that was not before him giving this scribe a visual tour of Putrajaya as seen from the Prime Minister's fifth floor office. He asked if I had prayed at the lakeside Putrajaya Mosque. He said the mosque is popular with foreign tourists and Chinese wedding parties. 'Wedding couples regularly use the mosque as the backdrop for their wedding photos. It must be the shape of the mosque,' said the Prime Minister.

I told him that it could also be feng shui as the mosque is almost surrounded by water. Water is supposed to be soothing and life giving.

If at all Pak Lah has changed, it is because he is now Prime Minister. The world around him is different from what he was used to as an ousted politician, a minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

Far from forsaking friends and associates, Pak Lah needs them more than ever. His success as Prime Minister, Umno President and Barisan Nasional Chairman depends on the stalwarts at the divisions and branches.

Others in between, be they the staff at his office, his political secretaries or his advisers, are merely the conduits. They are there to serve him so that he can serve the people.

Being a seasoned politician, Pak Lah is more than aware that comparisons

will, for a long time to come, continue to be drawn between him and his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir.

The old-timers will even compare him to other Prime Ministers. Thanks to the growing life expectancy, we even have people who had lived and served under the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the first Prime Minister.

It is disquieting to hear grassroot leaders complain that they cannot even shake hands with him at public functions because he is guarded too tightly by security people.

If this is true, then it is an absolute shame. Who is Pak Lah without these eager well-wishers and supporters? Here lies one of the major differences between the Prime Minister and his predecessor.

Pak Lah was a man of the people when he became Prime Minister. Tun Dr Mahathir, on the other hand, was seen as aloof and distant. The people did not expect him to be friendly and outgoing. But a few years into his tenure as Prime Minister, he became very accessible to the ordinary people at public functions and his regular weekend walkabouts.

Cut Pak Lah away from the people, and his whole character will be gone. So, bureaucracy and protocol aside, please do not keep him away from the people.

BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

THE Jan 7 appointment of Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Razak, 51, as the Deputy Prime Minister completed the transition process from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Logically, it should also end all speculation concerning the relationship between Abdullah and his now Number Two.

There will, no doubt, be disappointment and unhappiness but that is what democratic politics is all about. Only the most qualified, or, as some may say, the luckiest gets to fill the post. Still, personal disappointment should mean little to those whose mission in politics is to serve.

Abdullah and Najib are not unfamiliar with each other. They have known each other for more than 30 years, starting with Abdullah serving Najib's late father, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, way back in 1969. Abdullah was Razak's Assistant Principal Secretary in the post-May 13, 1969 National Operations Council (NOC).

They both enjoy almost identical political upbringing. While Najib's father was a civil servant who was swept into the post-Second World War nationalist politics, Abdullah traced his political ascendancy to his ulama grandfather, Sheikh Abdullah Fahim. Abdullah Fahim played a key role during the formative years of Umno and was for a long time among its spiritual leaders. Abdullah's father, Datuk Ahmad Badawi, was an equally influential ulama and Umno leader.

Abdullah and Najib were elected to Parliament at almost the same time. Najib was returned unopposed at the age of 22 as the Barisan Nasional Member of Parliament (MP) for Pekan in 1976 upon the death of his father and Abdullah in Kepala Batas two years later in the 1978 general election.

When he became Prime Minister in 1981, Tun Dr Mahathir promoted Abdullah to full minister and placed him in the Prime Minister's Department. A year later, Najib was appointed Menteri Besar of Pahang.

Either by coincidence or a deliberate plan by Tun Dr Mahathir, both Abdullah and Najib served the same key ministries - education and defence - during their journey to the top. While Abdullah's strong points lie in Islamic knowledge, civil service and foreign affairs, Najib is familiar with the economy and commerce, having worked with Petronas, the Finance Ministry (as Deputy Minister) and for nearly five years as Menteri Besar.

Therefore, assuming that the pecacai politik and an assortment of other political operators can be stopped from sowing the seeds of discontent,

Abdullah and Najib should have no problems forming an effective team.

As for Najib, he has proven that in politics patience is a virtue. At 23, a year into his career as an MP, I interviewed him at his family home in Jalan Eaton for the Business Times newspaper. This was what he had to say about politics then: 'One cannot study politics and become a politician for true political knowledge can be acquired only through experience.'

He has learnt his lesson well.