

04/01/2004

Press-ing issues

Ahirudin Attan

ONE of the first things a bunch of us did after taking over the administration of the National Press Club last March was to abolish the committee on press freedom.

It was a unanimous decision adopted by all 14 of us (two have since resigned but at the material time the pair were in complete agreement with the rest of the exco). I have not lost a night's sleep over that decision. The reason for killing that committee was simple, and obvious.

As we sat mulling the future of the club on the evening of our first exco meeting at the club house in Jalan Tangsi, Kuala Lumpur, we saw the need to focus on quite a few pressing issues we had inherited from the old guards (who had probably inherited them too).

The air-conditioning and ventilation systems were out of order, we discovered as we sweated over stacks of papers. Because of this, the previous administrators never held any of its exco meetings at the club house, preferring the cool comfort of a "borrowed" premise in Damansara instead.

The roof of the club house leaked. On several occasions when it rained hard members would be lounging around, sipping wine and watching the news in ankle-deep water.

The National Press Club had too few active members at that time. There have never been too many journalists in the country because the work is hard and the pay small, but certainly there were still more than a couple of thousands of us then.

The club had even fewer members from non-media corporations or from the Government and NGOs.

Often, guests would complain about the toilets. And if you did not drink and did not dart, you were at risk of dying of boredom from repeated tales of journalists' heroics or, at the very least, of turning suicidal from some really bad karaoke singing.

The pool table came later and it was heaven-sent. But not everybody enjoyed bending over. I love potting but after a certain age there is just so much your back can take.

The food was excellent, though. Often, outsiders who happened to be passing by and had decided to stop and check the club out would come back for the otak-otak, prawn mee, and (now no longer available) the mutton fried rice. Some of them have become associate members (or appointed themselves as associate members) after discovering that the company was even better.

So when Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob (SP), the Information Minister, lectured journalists about the "myth" of press freedom at the Malaysian Press Institute's press awards evening recently, I was miffed.

There are other more pressing issues.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad challenged the logic of press freedom ever since I became a journalist. Journalists and others in Malaysia have championed for and against press freedom since I was born.

Personally (even professionally), I say the issue of press freedom is passe. It has been overtaken by events. When they invented the Internet and Malaysians started surfing and polluting the websites, the whole issue about press freedom was settled, as far as I am concerned.

As the "press" covers all journalistic bodies including broadcast and the Internet. Just look around us, and tell me if there is no media

freedom in this country.

Look at the likes of Malaysiakini, Agenda Malaysia, and the on-line versions of the Harakah and other dailies. And surf some individual websites run by ex-journalists and journalist-wannabes. Tell me if that's not absolute press freedom.

Some have taken it upon themselves to take responsibility and be held responsible for the content of their websites.

Sadly, the effort and the conviction of those who run these sites have been undermined by other individuals who put up their own personal websites. These people appoint themselves as watchdogs but they seriously lack the moral, or even social, stature to be of any good to society.

Usually, they have no experience as journalists, no respect for the profession (or anything else other than themselves), and publish to damn others because it is now possible to do so without having to worry about lawsuits or the Home Ministry.

As a journalist, I enjoy the freedom to express my views and report the truth. There is press freedom; what the Malaysian press (in the real, NOT the cyber, world) want is greater freedom. What the people want, perhaps, is a freer press.

In any case, the National Press Club has just completed renovation of its club house and will be sending out invitations soon to members and friends. The roof isn't leaking anymore and Mr K has given us five units of big-horses air-cond units.

Maybe, the exco wants to think of setting up a committee of freer press?