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Knee-jerk reaction cost Umno Youth an opportunity to rise to the occasion

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THE attention heaped on Malaysiakini following the raid by the police last month has died down somewhat, at least domestically.

But the international community continues to express its support for the Internet news provider while condemning the nation's leadership for "violating the Press' freedom".

Ignored now is what sparked the whole issue in the first place.

On Jan 9, Malaysiakini published a letter from a reader who went by the pseudonym 'Petrof'.

The letter continued a debate sparked off by one Manjit Bhatia, who purportedly wrote from Australia.

Manjit's letter on Jan 3 was quite a vicious attack on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and questioned when equality of all races could prevail in Malaysia.

Coming out in defence of Dr Mahathir on Jan 7 was a reader who went by the pseudonym "Delimma" and who labelled Manjit a "frustrated-migrant Malaysian".

Delimma believed that each Malaysian had benefited from the system.

Then came Petrof's letter.

It began by labelling Delimma a "typical Bumiputera filled with smug complacency and adept at trotting out trite justifications for the pernicious politics that pervade Malaysia".

Petrof's letter offended Umno Youth, and information chief Azimi Daim lodged a police report.

The youth movement found offensive that Petrof equated it with the American Ku Klux Klan (which promoted white supremacy), charging it with perpetuating Malay hegemony and privileges.

In short, it viewed Petrof's letter as condemning Umno and Malay special privileges.

Actually, there was nothing new in what Petrof and Manjit had written about Umno, the Malays and the Bumiputera status that accorded the community its privileges.

Nor was there anything new in what Delimma put up in defence of Dr Mahathir and the existing system.

What turned the whole issue into a debacle was Umno Youth's police report and the police decision to raid the Malaysiakini office.

That led to a barrage of criticism, among them the violation of Press freedom.

It also made hollow the Government's commitment to no Internet censorship, made when it embarked on the Multimedia Super Corridor.

The whole episode could have been avoided had Umno Youth been more mature in dealing with needling by individuals or groups bent on questioning sensitive issues pertaining to race and privilege.

It would also have helped if Umno Youth had done some background research on Malaysiakini, which, financially, was in dire straits.

Also, unlike at the height of the push for reformasi and the 1999 general election, Malaysiakini had lost quite a big chunk of its readership and its subscribers had been thinning.

What Umno Youth did by lodging the report that led to the police raid was to give Malaysiakini a lifeline.

A Malaysian working for a foreign mission said:

"Now, given the attention it is getting from the international

community, Malaysiakini will probably win some award, apart from getting financial support from those sympathetic to its cause.

"If Umno Youth had not been so hasty, Malaysiakini would have, in the not-too-distant future, died a natural death."

Looking at the way Malaysiakini has managed to use the raid to its advantage, it is getting back quite a lot of support.

And, Umno Youth's aversity to the Internet news provider has, ironically, helped Malaysiakini gain a firmer footing.

Regardless of whether Malaysiakini's revival is good or otherwise for the nation, the issue which should have been addressed has now been ignored.

If Umno Youth had been truly sickened by what was written by Petrof, surely, given its huge membership, any one of its members or leaders could have been able to rebut what the writer said.

An apolitical professional Malay said:

"For so many years the Malays and Bumiputeras have been subjected to derision and derogatory remarks by their non-Malay counterparts over their privileges and rights.

"Some of us choose to be apologetic about them.

"A few take it upon themselves to side with the non-Malays to condemn the provisions.

"And others get riled when the privileges and rights are questioned.

"To my mind, Umno Youth, which is supposed to be the defender of these rights and privileges, should have the conviction and political will to defend them every time someone takes a dig at them."

What the Malay professional further pointed out is revealing.

"Let's get real. When Indonesia suffered its economic crisis, the target of anger was the Chinese minority, due to their economic prowess.

"That did not happen in Malaysia.

"If there was any anger, it was the Malays towards other Malays who were seen as having been more privileged under the system."

The matter of quotas, privileges and rights is enshrined in the Constitution and further expanded by the New Economic Policy, which itself was spawned from the rubble of the May 13, 1969, racial riots.

For the likes of Petrof to equate Umno Youth with the Ku Klux Klan is, obviously, a remark buoyed by emotion and lacking in rationale.

It should not have been taken seriously by anyone, least of all Umno Youth.

If anything, the manner Umno Youth reacted to it only gave credence to the likes of Petrof and others like him or her.

Furthermore, Umno Youth should again realise that its parent body has started talking about the need to remove the crutch that is the special privileges accorded to the Malays.

In fact, some of the measures are already in motion. For example, the doing away with the quota system for admission into public institutions of higher learning.

What Umno Youth should be doing right now is to publicly point out to its critics that it has the political will to make these changes.

Also, that it will not resort to measures that are no different to the seditious, racist and chauvinistic values promoted by the likes of Petrof, who are cowards hiding behind pseudonyms.

Umno Youth must have the courage of its convictions.

Hiding behind the skirts of the authorities does not a champion make.