

No government will bother about MTUC
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COMMENT The 61-year-old British-fathered Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) is still bogged down on the question of whether it is right for its leaders to be active in political parties (especially opposition parties).

Or whether it should continue to remain "free, independent, democratic and responsible" as its British father John Alfred Brazier had preached way back in the late 1940s.

A few candidates vying for various positions in today's MTUC elections have so far stated only their personal preferences and have not moved any motion to bar MTUC from political involvement.

Should MTUC enter politics (especially the opposition politics) or not has been the essential question haunting its leaders from the day of its inception.

If the present leadership is serious about barring the MTUC and its leaders from entering politics, then the right thing to do is to seek the decision of the delegates to that effect during its ongoing annual general meeting. What matters is the decision of the delegates, not the personal preferences of the contestants.

The fact that there is no such motion makes one to think that all this talk of "no politics" is aimed at only getting rid of candidates who are aligned with PKR.

The incumbent president Syed Shahir Syed Mohamud (right), who is going for another term, is an active member of PKR.

His challenger Mohd Khalid Atan is a protégé of the outgoing secretary-general G Rajasekaran, and had been preaching the gospel of John Brazier that he would "endeavour to restore the image of MTUC as an independent and apolitical workers organisation".

In supporting Atan's proposal for an apolitical workers organisation, Rajasekaran also contended that if the MTUC entered politics, the government would use race to further divide and weaken the workers' federation.

Solomon's political leanings no secret

One of the candidates for the post of secretary-general, Abdullah Sani Abdul Hamid, is already the Hulu Langat MP and PKR member. The other candidate is J Solomon of the National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE).

Solomon had been open about his support for former prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and had said that he supported Najib's 1Malaysia. So, his political leanings are no secret and he readily agreed with Rajasekaran that the MTUC leadership should work closely with the government to bring benefits to the workers.

The third candidate for the post is the incumbent deputy secretary-general, Abdul Halim Mansor, who is backed by Rajasekaran.

Rajasekaran (left) appears to be having nightmares about the two PKR men holding the two top posts of president and secretary-general, saying it would "compromise the congress on the decisions it makes".

His argument is that because some of the past MTUC leaders were in the opposition parties, the government regarded the congress as anti-government and that "the incoming council should eradicate this perception (of being anti-government) and sincerely work with the government to achieve substantial benefits for the members".

So, to come out of the 61-year-old malaise that has turned the MTUC into an anti-governmental organisation and to be on a buddy-buddy basis with the government in order to bring substantial benefits to the members of the unions affiliated to the MTUC, Rajasekaran, who has been the secretary-general of MTUC for 17 years, has himself, and through his supporters, put forward one simple proposition to the delegates voting today: Do not allow the two PKR strongmen to occupy the two top posts in MTUC.

If the two PKR men were stopped in their quest for the two topmost posts, Najib might invite the leaders for a 1Malaysia dinner. But, would the MTUC leaders get what they have been waiting for the last 61 years?

'Indian influence predominating'

A peep into the past of MTUC would leave no one in doubt as to the purpose for which it was created.

Back in the mid 1940s, the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU) had emerged as a serious threat to the British political and economic interests in Malaya. In June 1948, the Emergency was declared and the PMFTU was outlawed and its president, SA Ganapathay, was hanged.

To fill the "dangerous vacuum" left by the disappearance of the PMFTU, Brazier and his staff moved around and picked some English educated trade unionists who, according to Brazier himself, had "no intimate contact with the large majority of non-English speaking workers... few are aggressively champions of workers and too many of them rely ultimately upon government support for their positions".

Some of these trade unionists, like Ooi Thiam Siew of Penang MTUC, were sent overseas, including to Ruskin College, Oxford, to study "responsible unionism". A few were appointed to the Federal Legislative Council and the Labour Advisory Board.

After the training at Ruskin, Ooi asked, "What do we prefer to have in Malaya... a fighting union with all its attendant evils to workers, employers, the public and the government or a responsible union with necessary encouragement and cooperation, not only from the government, but sympathy and bond of friendship extended by all employers?"

With this type of new responsible trade union leaders "thoroughly re-educated", British High Commissioner Henry Gurney was ready to form a central organisation for workers in Malaya. He told the colonial secretary in his despatch dated April, 25, 1949, that it would be "something akin" to the British TUC "with the Indian influence predominating".

Thus was born the MTUC of today, complete with measures to divide and rule the Malayan workers. The trade union leaders, who had been handpicked by John Brazier, pledged

themselves to practise "free, independent, democratic and responsible unionism" and remain loyal to the colonial government.

Now, 61 years later, we have Mohd Khalid (right) promising to return to the pledge made then. Rajasekaran and Soloman are the current versions of Ooi Tiam Siew.

At the 1950 conference, PP Narayanan was elected the first president of MTUC. As far as the workers were concerned, his election was anything but democratic. He was first "selected" and approved by the Malayan colonial government, the employers and the colonial office, before he was "elected" at the conference.

The conference was held under the watchful eye of Brazier, who was the adviser to the conference, where and it was even proposed that "Mr John A Brazier, MBE" be appointed an honorary president of the council.

Of the 43 motions debated at the conference, two are of relevance today. One called on the government to take early steps to provide machinery for the determination of a minimum wage. The other one asked that the minimum wage for daily-paid workers be fixed at \$2.30. MTUC appears to be still where it started!

Loyalty to government never in question

Unlike the leaders of the PMFTU, whose commitment to the cause of labour was beyond question, which was even acknowledged by Brazier, MTUC leaders chosen by him were to pledge their loyalty to the government. Brazier made sure of that.

At the delegates conference held in 1950, the chairman of the conference, MP Rajagopal, in declaring MTUC's loyalty to the government said, "We are solidly behind the government in its efforts to end the present emergency." In due course, similar pledges of loyalty to the Alliance government were also made.

Even in the 1960s, when the MTUC was confronted with serious problems arising from the various amendments to the various labour legislation and came under pressure to take political action, it declared in February 1964, "The MTUC is politically non-aligned... It desires to remain free to criticise the government of the day... It is the determination of the MTUC to remain and retain its identity as a free, independent, democratic and responsible national trade union centre". This Brazieren tenet still rules the roost.

Worst still. The then Minister of Labour V Manickavasagam, who was the least cooperative of all the ministers, sought to become president of the International Labour Organisation. MTUC did campaign actively to defeat his rival from the Philippines. And the MTUC felt very proud of its achievement.

In the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, Lim Ah Lek, then minister of human resources, did all he could to create in-house unions and set up a counter national trade union centre called Malaysian Labour Organisation. Yet, MTUC cooperated with him in the matter of submitting a joint country report to the ILO annual session.

MTUC has remained steadfast in its commitment to support the government during the last 61 years. It is the government and prime ministers like Abdullah Ahmad who have treated the MTUC with contempt. Did not Abdullah tell the MTUC, "you can picket 100 times, the decision of no stays"?

MTUC leaders have been in politics all the time

Even if the MTUC shuns politics, others want it in party politics. It is one of the largest organisations in the country. Onn Jaafar and Tan Cheng Loke were the earliest to woo it.

Narayanan was a member of the Kuala Lumpur branch of Onn's Independence of Malaya Party (IMP), along with John Brazier. In fact, that was the first incident that caused Tunku Abdul Rahman to doubt the MTUC's loyalty to his government!

Further, Narayanan's involvement with IMP stood in the way of the MTUC joining forces with the Labour Party.

NUBE's president Yeoh Teck Chye was a prominent president of the MTUC from 1965 to 1974 and he was also the MP for Bukit Bintang. He was a leading member of Gerakan, and later Pekemas.

The other notable one is Zainal Rampak. He was wherever V David was. But, later, he moved out from DAP to Semangat 46 and from there to Umno, and was later made a Senator.

Now, it is is Syed Shahir, a member of PKR.

Of all the MTUC secretaries-general, the most prominent politician was David. To him politics was life.

The other secretary-general, who was a member of Pekemas, was SJH Zaidi. Yeoh and Zaidi were holding office as president and secretary-general respectively at the same time. Even John Gurusamay, the deputy secretary-general, was a member of Pekemas. They never compromised the interests of the MTUC. There was not even an allegation of such compromise.

So, why now the complaint that Syed Shahir and Abdullah Sani (right), in the event they become president and secretary-general respectively, might compromise the interests of the MTUC?

It must also be noted that in all its 61 years, the MTUC had twice come close to formally entering the political arena. One, the move to join forces with the Labour Party, as referred to above.

In May 1965, a special delegates conference of the MTUC authorised it to involve itself in politics. As usual, there was a move to give the government some time to favourably consider its proposals in respect of its amendments to the various labour laws.

Since the government did not respond as expected, the 18th annual delegates conference adopted the committee's report to look into the question of the MTUC's involvement in politics.

Why did the MTUC do this? Zaidi says, "...while the MTUC had for about 20 years avoided taking part directly in politics, there was little choice in the matter by 1969 and this was because it felt that politics was perhaps the only course of action to bring an appreciable change in the government attitude toward labour and labour problems". But nothing followed this decision.

So the MTUC just cannot say that it would remain an apolitical organisation no matter what happened to the workers. It should be borne mind that none of the present leaders of the MTUC is personally that close to the government leaders as were the earlier leaders. Yet, they were forced by the situation confronting them to take a stand.

The MTUC must always be prepared to do what is required to defend the rights of the workers it represents, including the removal of the government of the day.

MTUC is never neutral

Recently, the minister of human resources complained that the MTUC had lost its neutrality. Some MTUC leaders and affiliates think that the MTUC must be neutral, but that it can support the BN government. No trade union federation anywhere in the world is neutral. The MTUC was given the duty to be loyal to the government.

Britain's TUC, the mother of all TUCs in the world, has never been neutral. It set up the Labour Party, which in 1945 unseated the ruling Conservative-Liberal coalition government.

In India, Jawaharlal Nehru was at one time president of both the Congress Party and the National Trade Union Congress. James Bob Hawk of Australia was the president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions as well the president of the Australian Labour Party and went straight on to become prime minister.

The government and ruling parties prefer MTUC to remain apolitical because they know what an angry working class can do to them.

But the MTUC of today is not in a position to flex its muscles. It is, in terms of numerical strength, very weak. It cannot even assemble enough workers to have a great May Day parade.

In 1948, 66.6 per cent of the total workforce of Malaya was organised into trade unions, according to the ILO Report. That accounted for the power of the PMFTU.

In 2010, MTUC represents only about 10 per cent of the Malaysian workers. No government, whether BN or Pakatan Rakyat, is going to bother about the MTUC, whether it is political or apolitical.

The MTUC leaders must also bear in mind that no government is going to listen to its demands and order the employers to comply. It works the other way round. This was pointed out way back in 1776 by Adam Smith: "Whenever the legislature attempts to regulate the differences between masters and servants, the counsellors are always the masters."