

**The making of a police state**  
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No matter how hard Dr Mahathir Mohamad tries to whitewash his dark record over Operation Lalang, he will surely fail because there will be many more truth-seeking historians on stand-by to put the record straight.

At least one fact stands out: Mahathir now seems ashamed of his role in Ops Lalang. And so he should be after more than two decades of trying to justify the dastardly act.

But can he wriggle out of the responsibility even though former inspector-general of police Hanif Omar has so graciously come forward to claim credit for it?

First of all, what do you expect of a former IGP who was prepared to walk through the revolving door of a top police post upon retirement straight into the board of a corporation that makes its money from gambling in Genting Highlands?

There are two issues here: (i) the ethical problem of top government servants retiring into companies which have a bearing on their previous departments; (ii) the hypocrisy of prohibiting Muslim workers from serving in establishments which serve alcohol but allowing Muslim elite to be in the board of gambling outfits.

The former IGP now claims that the police force he led was responsible for Ops Lalang and not the prime minister, who was then also home minister.

Is this the way our democracy operates? What has happened to the principle of ministerial responsibility? True, these are mere principles you might say, but it also makes our ministers and former prime minister look like idiots.

**Tunku's take on Ops Lalang**

Of course, Mahathir would not want to be remembered as an idiot or a weak prime minister either. The truth is, as the Tunku Abdul Rahman said when Ops Lalang happened: "Overnight Malaysia has become a police state."

In a police state, there is usually little or no distinction between the law and the exercise of political power by the executive. It does not mean that the police have taken over the political reins of power. Such a situation is facilitated by the existence of laws that allow detention without trial.

People in a police state experience restrictions on their freedoms of expression, assembly and association, while a secret police force operates outside the boundaries normally imposed by a constitutional state which can tell the executive who the "enemies of the state" are.

In 1987 when Ops Lalang was unleashed, our elderly 'Bapa Malaysia' could see that the country had become a police state even though the donkeys in the BN could not. He could also see the underlying reasons for Mahathir's actions and put it bluntly:

"Umno was facing a break-up. The prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad's hold on the

party appeared critical when election rigging was alleged to have given him a very narrow victory against Tunku Razaleigh (Hamzah).

"The case alleging irregularities brought by Umno members was pending in court. If the judgment went against him he would have no choice but to step down. So he had to find a way out of his predicament.

"A national crisis had to be created to bring Umno together as a united force to fight a common enemy - and the imaginary enemy in this case was the Chinese community...

"If there was indeed a real security threat facing the country, why was action not taken much sooner when (the arrested and detained) ... were alleged to have made dangerous racial speeches as far back as 1984?"

The underlying factor, which determined the uncertainty in Malaysian politics ever since 1986, was the power struggle within Umno. This relentless power struggle was inevitable considering the size of the spoils of the New Economic Policy at stake.

The irreconcilable differences between Team A led by Mahathir and Team B led by Razaleigh was the destabilising factor which dominated the ruling BN coalition. This, in turn, set in train other destructive forces within the coalition's member parties.

### **Orchestrated communalism**

And as communalism is the stock-in-trade of the BN communal partners in any precarious situation, race politics becomes the order of the day.

Not surprisingly, the factions in Umno began to beat their breasts about Malay dominance which had been aired by Abdullah Ahmad in 1986 while the MCA played out its own orchestrated role as the champion of the Chinese.

It was in this communalist climate that the usual "sensitive issues" were bandied around; raising such issues as non-qualified senior assistants being sent to Chinese-medium schools. If one studies the daily papers in the period before Oct 27, 1987 - the day of the crackdown - the characteristic racial exchanges between Umno and MCA can be clearly discerned.

What is characteristic of Malaysian politics is that when the dominant party Umno has internal problems, these problems are quickly externalised. Controversies then seem to break out over various government directives.

This included one regarding the recitation of a pledge in Malacca schools in May 1987, which the non-Malays regarded as having Islamic connotations and unacceptable to their beliefs.

In July, the 'electives' issue erupted over the Universiti Malaya's decision to scrap elective courses taught in English, Chinese and Tamil in the respective language departments. Meanwhile, within the Islamic quarter, there emerged a hue and cry over the Christianisation of Malays by Christian evangelists.

Then in October, the Education Ministry decided to appoint (linguistically) non-qualified senior officials in Chinese-medium primary schools. This met with outrage by the Chinese community who did not want the character and standards in these schools to be altered irreparably.

Mass meetings were held in various parts of the country calling upon the parties to resolve the issue. It must be noted that these meetings were orderly and there have been no complaints from the police who actually sanctioned the meetings.

In mid-October, Umno Youth staged a rally at an open-air stadium in Kuala Lumpur. At this rally, several leading Umno politicians including a cabinet minister who is now prime minister made racially provocative statements. Banners bearing flagrantly racist and seditious slogans such as "Bathe this (kris) in Chinese blood" and the like were blatantly displayed (See the government's White Paper).

These leading Umno politicians somehow escaped the ISA dragnet. Perhaps the gracious former IGP would care to explain why?

### **Games the police play**

Were the police powerless in that situation? As I told my Special Branch interrogation officers during the Ops Lalang crackdown, the limits to the freedom of expression must surely lie not only where it trespasses upon racial sensitivities but also where the police feel confident of keeping law and order.

In this particular incident, the flaunting of racist and seditious banners and speeches clearly showed that the police had no control unless of course, they condoned it. And if they could not manage a few thousand people, how could they even contemplate allowing the proposed Umno anniversary rally of some 500,000 to take place?

By not disallowing the massive rally plans outright, the racial tension was left to build up and this provided the perfect justification for another ISA swoop on all Mahathir's dissidents.

Mahathir craftily counted on the ignorance of Tom Plate, the author of 'Conversations with Mahathir Mohamad', who did not follow through his probing by asking how the then home minister signed the two-year detention orders for detainees such as me after the 60-day solitary confinement.

He wouldn't have been able to wriggle out of that one nor will the former IGP be able to play the gracious government servant.