

**Ops Lalang: Mahathir's autocracy at its worst**  
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COMMENT Throughout the Arab world today, autocrats have never looked more pathetic. It brings to mind the Czech diplomat Jan Masaryk's quip quite a few years ago that "Autocrats are rulers who always look good until the last ten minutes".

Over here, Malaysia's most famous autocrat has been busy in his autumnal years trying to whitewash his record in office by publishing his semi-fictional memoirs. Even before it was published, he couldn't help but claim in a pre-launch publicity event that Operasi Lalang was not his doing but that of the police.

This was not surprising since Operasi Lalang was Dr Mahathir Mohamad's worst abuse of power during his 23-year rule. The White Paper on Operasi Lalang published in 1988 was itself the worst example of official whitewash to justify the arrests and detentions.

We know that 1987 was a time during his term when he was faced with the biggest threat to his rule, with Team B under Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah challenging the results of the Umno elections. A court decision in Team B's favour would have meant the end of Mahathir's grasp on power.

In the run up to Operasi Lalang and before the assault on the judiciary resulting in the sacking of the Lord President and several other Supreme Court judges, the ruling party had orchestrated a tense situation in the country by creating various 'sensitive' issues involving the sending of non-Mandarin-qualified administrators to the Chinese schools, the alleged conversion of Muslims to Christianity and even threatened to organise a 500,000-strong Umno rally in the capital.

**Autumn for autocrats**

All this was to justify unleashing Operasi Lalang to deal with the so-called "enemies" identified by the state.

Tunku Abdul Rahman, at the time in his twilight years, had more perception and integrity than Mahathir in his prime. This is how he described Operasi Lalang: "Umno was facing a break-up. 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 over Tengku Razaleigh.

"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 Umnp together as a united force to fight a common enemy - and the imaginary enemy in this case was the Chinese community." (K Das/ Suaram: 'The White paper on the October Affair and the Why? Papers', Suaram, Petaling Jaya 1989: 10)

Richard Perle, an adviser in the Reagan Administration once said: "Autocrats must have enemies. They must have internal enemies to justify their secret police and external enemies to justify their military forces."

I was supposed to have been one of those who posed a threat to national security in

October 1987. So was Yeshua Jamaluddin, the Malay convert to Christianity, Islamic deviationists, church activists, Chinese educationists, social activists, and MPs, including the leader of the opposition.

Can you imagine the leader of the House of Commons being detained without trial? No, this can only happen in a banana republic where the Internal Security Act is at the convenient disposal of the government-of-the-day ever since its introduction in 1960.

The most blatant use of the ISA by the ruling coalition to cripple its political opponents was the arrest and detention of practically the entire leadership of the Socialist Front, the main threat to the Alliance during the sixties. This sham democracy was the main reason for the Socialist Front's boycott of the 1969 general elections.

### **No one safe from ISA**

But if you think that you could never fall victim to the ISA, think again! Hilmy Mohd Nor, a company executive working for Shell, never dreamed he could be detained under the ISA. Operasi Lalang was a living nightmare for this completely apolitical Malaysian. He thought the ISA was only meant to be used against the communists.

parliament and anti isa internal security actOr maybe you think that being Malay, he should not have converted to Christianity... but it would take a twisted imagination to view that as a threat to national security.

In his haste to pull the wool over the eyes of those who may not remember Operasi Lalang by blaming it on the police, Mahathir has overlooked something that is so elementary to the ISA, namely, it is the Home Minister (ie. Mahathir at the time) who signs the two-year detention order after the first 60 days of solitary confinement.

When he signed those two-year orders near the end of 1988, he would have noticed a stark fact - all the detainees were opposition leaders and other dissidents while all the BN detainees had been conveniently released during the 60 days! The IGP didn't sign those detention orders - Mahathir did. He conveniently omitted such stark historical facts from his memoirs.

The allegations against me in the detention order were so flimsy they would make an autocrat blush:

(i) That I was responsible for drafting the 1985 Joint Declaration by the Chinese associations;

(ii) That I was responsible for publishing 'Polarisation in Malaysia: The Root Causes' in 1987;

(iii) That I had called on the people to support mother tongue education;

(iv) That I had questioned the New Economic Policy and National Cultural Policy.

Firstly, the Joint Declaration had called for reform based on democracy and human rights and it was endorsed by 27 major Chinese associations, comprising practically all the Chinese associations in Malaysia. If the memorandum was indeed a threat to national security, shouldn't all these big leaders of the Chinese community be held responsible rather than the person who was supposed to have drafted it?

Secondly, 'Polarisation in Malaysia: The Root Causes' published by K Das Ink was not banned by the government so why should the alleged author be detained for being a threat to national security? In contrast, Mahathir's 'Malay Dilemma' was banned because it was considered unfit for public consumption by the government-of-the-day but he was not detained under the ISA. Such is the inconsistency in the government's use of the ISA.

Thirdly, even the Barisan Nasional has claimed that they support Chinese and Tamil schools, so why should my call for support of mother tongue education be considered a threat to national security?

Finally, if questioning the NEP and NCP can be considered a threat to national security, should all Malaysians who question the NEP, including Anwar Ibrahim and Khalid Ibrahim, also be detained under the ISA?

The arrest and detention of leaders from the whole spectrum of Malaysian society under Operasi Lalang was indeed the realisation of that well-known quote attributed to Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) about the inactivity of German intellectuals following the Nazi rise to power:

"First they came for the communists,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.  
Then they came for me  
and there was no one left to speak out for me."

### **Former IGP taking credit for torture?**

Since Mahathir tried to disclaim responsibility for Operasi Lalang, former IGP Haniff Omar has graciously - if I may say, foolhardily - claimed credit for it. I would say he is foolhardy because he must take responsibility for all the allegations of torture made by Operasi Lalang victims.

The 60 days of solitary confinement are already a gross example of mental torture. Nasir Hashim, Chow Chee Keong, Irene Xavier among others have graphically described being physically tortured by the Special Branch while under solitary confinement during the first sixty days.

This is Yeshua Jamaluddin's affidavit at his habeas corpus hearing in October 1988: "I was not allowed to sleep for days at a stretch and was warned that I would not get any food if I did not cooperate. One Inspector Yusoff also threatened to disturb my girlfriend if I did not give any information. I was assaulted by Inspectors Yusoff, Zainuddin, Ayub and another officer on a number of occasions.

"On one occasion, I was knocked to the ground and I injured my back. Since then, I have been passing blood in my urine and have been suffering from pains in my lower back constantly. In March 1988 and in July 1988, I was warded at the Universiti Hospital, Kuala Lumpur for treatment of my kidney condition. I have still not recovered...

"On another occasion during interrogation, Inspector Yusoff forced me to strip naked and to

enact the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He also forced me to crawl on the floor in a naked state...

"Another day, a police constable forced me to stand on one leg with both my arms outstretched holding my slippers. He made me remain in this position for two hours. He then called in a woman constable and her young daughter and asked them to look at me saying: 'This Malay is not aware of who he is. He changed his religion. He has no shame!'"

Torture under the ISA has been perpetrated with impunity by the Malaysian Special Branch ever since it was enacted in 1960. Unfortunately for Mahathir, the principle of ministerial responsibility means that as the Home Minister and Prime Minister at the time, he is ultimately responsible for Operasi Lalang and all the atrocities committed under this dragnet.

The tortures undergone by ISA detainees during the Fifties, Sixties, Seventies and Eighties are well known to those who know these former ISA detainees. The following is an excerpt from a hitherto unpublished statement by "political prisoners of Kawasan A, B, and C", dated May 1, 1969, released from Batu Gajah Detention Camp:

"1. We political detainees have undergone days and nights of endless interrogation which have inflicted a grave toll on the mental condition of many detainees;

"2. During interrogation, we have been handcuffed, had our abdominal parts kicked, our heads bashed against the wall until they bled, and some have had to be hospitalised;

"3. We have had needles stuck in our fingernails and pencils used to squeeze our fingers between them;

"4. We have been burnt with cigarette lighters and hit with elastic bands; some have had nails inserted into their genitals;

"5. We have been asked to strip off our pants and to sit on open bottles;

"6. We have been made to take off our clothing and to stand before fans and air conditioners until we have passed out..."

In recent years, torture under the ISA has been graphically described by victims such as Malek Hussein and Munawar Anees, whose statutory declarations can be read on the Internet.

### **ISA as an instrument of terror**

The ISA has served the Alliance and Barisan Nasional for more than 50 years as an instrument of terror to deter any challenge to its rule. The terror starts from the call to the victim's house in the middle of the night by Special Branch operatives in unmarked cars. The foreboding terror continues throughout the sixty days of solitary confinement and interminable interrogation.

Then when the detainee is sent to Kamunting detention camp, he or she is faced with the terror of an indeterminate period of internment. When I was first sent to Kamunting, my cell mate was Loh Ming Liang who told me he had been detained for 16 years! Imagine the thoughts and feelings that go through your mind when you face such a prospect! That has been part of the terror of the ISA all these 50 years.

With such a record, the Malaysian government has the temerity to sit on the UN Human Rights Council. With such a record, it is not surprising the Malaysian government has not ratified the Convention against Torture. With such a record, we can see why the Malaysian government and the IGP are reluctant to establish the Independent Police Complaints Misconduct Committee as asked for by the Royal Police Commission set up in 2004.

Malaysians who care about freedom and justice, democracy and human rights in our country should demand the abolition and not just amendment of this vile Act and the other laws that allow detention without trial.

More than 10,000 Malaysians have been incarcerated under the ISA since 1960. We do not, we cannot and we will not accept any amendments to this Indefensible Suppression Apparatus. All fair-minded and freedom-loving people must not condone detention without trial, which has become an addiction of autocrats.

**DR KUA KIA SOONG is director of human rights group Suaram. This was his speech delivered at the Conference on the 50th Anniversary of the Internal Security Act at Amnesty International, London, April 2, 2011.**

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