

The 'outing' of Rahim Noor
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COMMENT Now that former inspector-general of police Abdul Rahim Noor has made his skepticism about human rights obvious in his keynote address to the Perkasa general meeting last week, we can retrospectively understand aspects of his conduct when he was the country's top cop.

One would have thought Rahim, following the loss of his job and having endured the humiliation of jail for assaulting former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in the infamous 'black eye' incident in 1998, would go gently into a retirement where golf would not be the only diversion.

Certainly, a sustained bout of community service would have helped to assuage society's bruised sensitivities: nothing obtains a disgraced former luminary redemption in the public eye better than diligent and long service to communitarian projects.

But Rahim, after a discrete re-emergence to public life in recent years via newspaper interviews on policing and crime prevention on which he made sense, has abruptly discarded the obscurity of the periphery to publicly vent views that make him the local version of the John Birch Society.

John Birchers, a shadowy group that haunted power centres in the south and west of the United States, were notorious in the 1950s and 60s for propounding right-wing views on race, the communist threat and military spending.

Trigger-happy cops

People who knew something of Rahim's deportment towards rape suspects and others of society's dregs while he was the force's head honcho would not be terribly surprised to hear that he has scant respect for human rights.

In fact, his rebellion against restraint on that sinister night in the Special Branch lock-up in late September 1998 where Anwar was held blindfolded was seen by those privy to his conduct as the outcome of propensities unwisely left unchecked.

Unfortunately for Rahim, the 'top officer-should-not-be-contradicted' ethos of the uniformed services - entrenched by the time he became IGP in the early 1990s - disserved him: there was nobody to tug at his sleeve and whisper that police power is not an invitation to vigilante justice.

By 1996, when the late and prominent lawyer Raja Aziz Addruse warned that the police were "trigger-happy" because the toll from custodial deaths had reached distressing levels, Rahim chided the then National Human Rights Society (Hakam) president for insensitivity to the dangers faced by cops when tackling violent criminals.

Shortly after he admonished Raja Aziz, there was an obscure but disturbing report of a lorry driver who had a roadside altercation with the IGP in which a shot was fired, though nobody was hurt.

The matter drew skimpy mention in the press. A while later, the 'black eye' incident broke like a tornado in the public arena; and people's feelings were inflamed.

In the incident's immediate aftermath, graffiti aimed at Rahim - in some places drawn in aerosol which made it inefaceable for a long time - appeared at conspicuous intersections along major thoroughfares, excoriating him for abject servility to the powers-that-be.

Some viewed the incident of Rahim's action or reaction against Anwar in the Special Branch lock-up as illustrative of his temperament; not just the aberrant issue of momentary self-derangement.

Until Rahim's accession to the IGP post, its previous holders - from Salleh Ismail through to Hanif Omar - managed to exude authority without a hint of menace in their department.

This is a tricky call in the more lofty brackets of the police force: how to evince command to all and sundry sans the suggestion that it would be unwise to tangle with the person.

'Black eye' public inquiry

With Rahim's promotion to IGP - the man is huskily-built and sports a bristling mustache - the aura of exuding authority without evincing menace was no more a requisite for the post. Rahim looks like someone one would not like to be caught against in a fray in a back alley.

Of course, all these arguments are impressionistic, but the concept that civil servants, the top tier in particular, should be non-partisan and politically neutral servants of the state, rather than tribunes of the government of the day is incontestable.

There was a anguished piece of testimony in the public inquiry into the 'black eye' incident that purported to show a frazzled Rahim, in the tense prelude to Anwar's sacking by Mahathir from the government and Umno in August-September 1998, pleading with Anwar to settle his problems with the then prime minister.

Strictly speaking, it was no business of the then IGP to be in any of the several roles - intermediary, plenipotentiary or supplicant - his pleadings to Anwar suggested he was inclined to play in the internecine feuding between the PM and his deputy.

In fact, it would seem that Rahim wasted a wonderful opportunity to show the requisite professionalism of his level of civil servant - wryly aware of the passions eddying around him in the political sphere but strictly neutral in the execution of his fiduciary duties to the state.

He disdained the professional's neutral stance for the seeming role of overwrought equerry of the incumbent PM. The beating up of Anwar was, then, only a short downward spiral from an already muddled conception of public duty.

Now the disgraced former IGP has gone and done his already tarnished record worse by spouting off on human rights, the social contract and the constitution.

The muddled do as the addled always does.

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