

**Confluence of times past, times present in times future**  
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COMMENT It was almost a quarter century since the time the Thean Hou Temple in Kuala Lumpur was the scene of a similar, politically reverberating gathering.

But last Friday night's fundraising dinner for PKR vice president Nurul Izzah Anwar had all the signs that the rousingly supported event's progressivism would eventually triumph over its antecedent's repressive legacy.

Just the fact that two of its principal attendees - Lim Kit Siang of DAP and Mohamed Sabu of PAS - who, incidentally, were among the past occasion's notable victims, were sitting side by side in a collaborative endeavor to right past wrongs was an augury of things to come.

Further, when you place the presence of the two veteran politicians alongside the youth of the occasion's chief beneficiary, it was hard to resist the conclusion that a long past was coming together with a fairly recent one to pave the way for a restorative future.

This promising outlook would have been impossible to imagine if you moved the clock a half century back.

Back in 1987, the Thean Hou temple was the scene of an MCA-inspired gathering of language activists who were seething over a government move to place non-Mandarin proficient administrators in Chinese medium schools.

Chinese language education was a hot button issue in those days. In October 1987, the emotive issue roiled political waters to heighten communal tensions to a pitch of intensity not seen since May 1969.

In apparent reaction to the Thean Hou gathering, a massive Umno-organised demonstration was planned for the Merdeka Stadium, but Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed (left) countermanded the assembly after having allowed a rabble rousing demo, led by present PM Najib Razak (then the Umno Youth chief), to take place at the Jalan Raja Muda Stadium.

In a display of warped priorities that reflected his penchant for Machiavellian maneuver, Mahathir, also the home minister then, moved to prevent the unrest from reaching ignition pint.

He approved the detention under the ISA of several score opposition politicians (Kit Siang and Sabu among them), together with some pols from his own party (allied to his intra-party detractors), and a host of mother tongue and other social activists while suspending the publication of a couple of newspapers.

#### Repressive measures

The legacy of this raft of repressive measures, unchecked by a rubber stamp Parliament and unhindered by a subservient judiciary which was soon to become a supine one, has lain like an albatross around the neck of the nation's politics ever since.

Last Friday's dinner - its timing, setting, the struggles and message of its principal honorees, and the career trajectory of its chief beneficiary - went a long way towards sustaining the hope that grand rectification is on the cards.

Sabu set the balling rolling by asking the 900-plus crowd if they could imagine a previous time when a PAS leader was comfortable about being invited to dinner in the hall of a Taoist temple.

Though Sabu (right) claims that the genesis of his ease in non-Muslim settings lay in his childhood in Tasek Gelugor in mainland Penang, one surmises it must have been strengthened in the days he was detained in Kamunting in the same block with Lim Guan Eng, another victim of the contrived furor of 1987 and its pernicious legacy.

Sabu told diners who payed RM100/- for a ticket to the function that he was unconcerned about Umno propaganda that portrayed him a tool of Guan Eng, his Penang Chief Minister friend, who has to fend off incessant attacks by Umno.

"Now they (Umno) have linked me to communists," referring to his apparent exoneration of the Reds in their attack on the Bukit Kepong police station in Johor during the Emergency, a controversy-charged episode in that period's contentious history.

"Let them give me five minutes on television," he challenged his detractors, saying that was all the time he needed to be able to explain his case.

That Sabu is one of Malaysian politics' recognisably multi-racial leaders could be inferred from the warmth of the standing ovation he received when he resumed his seat next to Lim senior.

He had spoken in Bahasa Malaysia, inserting at telling points popularly known words from vernacular languages that the crowd has come to accept as Malaysian colloquialisms.

The man's transparently straightforward manner, stereotype-defying political persona, and adept use of the Malay language in ways where meaning and manner blend effortlessly to convey points makes him a jewel in the opposition Pakatan's constellation of elocutionary draws.

Making the case for intelligent choice

Quite different to Kit Siang's attractions in the same cause: the DAP strongman of more than four decades' experience of the public arena relies on well-corroborated points that light the way for the audience to make an educated choice.

Kit Siang (left) has been making the case for intelligent choice by the Malaysian electorate for some 45 years now and at times in the past that must have daunted him as Sisyphean in scope.

But last Friday on seeing the rousing support for a reformasi icon in the tertiary-qualified ambience of a tony Kuala Lumpur suburb, he must have felt the slumber-inviting pull of the "lovely, dark and deep" woods of the Robert Frost's poetic evocation against the "miles to go" before he could rest from a lifetime's exertions.

For in Nurul Izzah Anwar, who at 31 is half Sabu's years and a little over a third Kit Siang's age, the long distance torch carriers of the

Malaysian democratic restoration have a legatee who is mindful of the "promises to keep" that had drawn Frost's traveler away from a deserved rest.

Thus last Friday, times long past combined with times present to give a tantalising glimpse of times future.

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