

Chandra Muzaffar's lambasting of Bersih

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COMMENT Friends have asked me what prompted the extraordinary hatchet job that Dr Chandra Muzaffar attempted on the Bersih 3.0 movement and its leaders in his recent article misleadingly titled 'Bersih and the Quest for Human Rights' published in various media.

What was in the article that could be of academic or scholarly value to warrant any close reading? Those attracted by the title may have expected an article on how the quest for human rights in Malaysia may have taken on fresh urgency given the police manhandling of the demonstrators and the media, and the many instances of violation of democratic rights.

lebanon forum 050906 chandra muzaffarIn the Internet and mainstream media, the issue of police brutality has become the main focus and memory of demonstrators and the Malaysian public. That could have been a topic that Chandra - in defending the status quo - could have brought fresh insights from a human rights perspective.

However, he chose not to do so. Instead he churned out a propagandistic piece praising the political reforms undertaken as well as aimed at demonising the Bersih leaders and its supporters from the opposition.

His reminder about the "degree of integrity in the electoral process" and the fact that there is no electoral process in the world that is totally free of blemish is quite a turn-around. The Chandra of old that I remember was lucid, scathing and critical of the lopsided electoral playing field in favour of the Barisan Nasional and the formidable array of dirty tricks, including mal-apportionment and gerrymandering, it used to win elections.

This includes control of the mainstream mass media that is now unsurprisingly keen to publish any piece that Chandra provides - certainly a far cry from past practice when he was with Aliran or the opposition.

In my numerous conversations with him during the 16 years that we were friends and colleagues at Universiti Sains Malaysia, we talked and shared similar views of the unfair and un-free electoral process and also of BN's manipulation of the system that enabled it to hold on to power indefinitely.

Changed his view on many issues

Today, Chandra seems to have changed his view on the ruling party and many issues in the country, including that of the state of civil liberties. According to him, "It is an irrefutable fact that through these legislative reforms [Peaceful Assembly Act, ISA repeal, etc] the space and scope for the expression and articulation of human rights has been expanded and enhanced as never before."

That "irrefutable fact", as Chandra terms it, is not irrefutable. It needs the passage of time and confirmation from the ground to ascertain what has been gained and whether the reforms are substantive or simply cosmetic to pre-empt regime change. Sweeping or grandstanding statements such as the one above made by him are premature and smack of political partisanship.

Should Dr Chandra, after conducting rigorous social science research - publish the results of his work confirming this "irrefutable fact", it may perhaps help convince sceptics that there have been "far reaching changes to political and civil liberties."

In the meantime, his pronouncements on the changes in the country are less convincing and less thoughtful than the one below, which could have come from the pen of the Chandra of old.

Excerpts from Muaz Omar: 'Claiming back our freedom' (The Malaysian Insider, May 3, 2010):

"As the nation and its people developed and progressed, Umno has dragged its feet, not wanting to accept that the social and political fabric has changed.

NONE" They are trapped in their old ways, continuing their archaic doctrine of oppression, rampant corruption and abuse of power as well as propagating religious and racial tensions.

"Half-hearted and watered-down transformation policies by Prime Minister Najib Razak failed to diminish the desire of Malaysians for a better deal.

"The people are not impressed by the lack of political will.

"This resulted in the resounding success of Bersih 3.0 on April 28 in Kuala Lumpur and 80 other cities around the world.

"Hundreds of thousands, mostly young, of all races attended the gathering in Kuala Lumpur peacefully until the riot police took action.

"Ordinary Malaysians were beaten up and tear-gassed. Even local and foreign media personnel were manhandled, some with their equipment destroyed and confiscated.

"This black mark on Malaysian democracy reaffirms concerns that Najib lacks the desire or the will to reform.

"His much-touted Peaceful Assembly Act did not provide any democratic civil rights to the people but is used to forcefully maintain the hegemony of his own party.

"In short, Najib continues to engage in repressive and authoritarian tactics of former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"The tenacity as well as desire of Malaysians for substantive change was evident during the rally.

"As Najib and Umno-BN leaders try to downplay and dismiss this demand by shifting blame and pointing fingers, Pakatan Rakyat needs to listen closely to Malaysians and not misread or take for granted their desire for change.

"The people swarmed the capital with the intent of claiming back their freedom; they are tired, they are fed-up, and they are angry."

Unprecedented attack on some activists

My final problem with Chandra's article is its unprecedented attack on some of the Bersih and opposition activists as "frauds and hypocrites without any sincere commitment to freedom and democracy".

According to him, "through their politics of deceit and duplicity, they continue to manipulate mass sentiments for their own diabolical agenda". These are strong accusations, going beyond even what the BN leaders have said.

Who are these people he describes as frauds and hypocrites? It is unethical to hide under the cover of generalisation in making these allegations.

Besides the requirement of naming them, Chandra should realise that as a social scientist, he must provide evidence to prove his argument that they are frauds and hypocrites.

What actions have they engaged in to deserve such demonising from a senior social scientist holding the esteemed position of Noordin Sopiee Professor of Global Studies?

Has he conducted any interviews with the Bersih leaders to get them to explain their positions? Or has he found them guilty without bothering to speak to them?

Is this the view of key independent respondents such as those who took part in the rallies? Or is this the view of the larger population? Or perhaps, is it the view of some of the BN leaders?

These and a myriad other questions need to be answered by Chandra. Otherwise he will be seen as another BN mouthpiece out to score cheap points, using the cloak of academic position to bolster his politically-biased opinion.

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