

Memali a 'Musa said/Dr M said' morality play
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COMMENT Much of the difficulty in political life of disentangling fact from fiction lies in 'I said/He said' situations.

One man's word against the other's on what happened is spawning grounds for manic contention. This would not matter if the issue at hand held no purchase for the integrity of rival contenders.

Saiful Bukhari Azlan claimed that Anwar Ibrahim sodomised him; Anwar said he did no such thing. There were no witnesses; only the dubiously retrieved presence of DNA that one judge ruled to be suspect, following which a sitting panel of appellate ones held the same to be incriminating.

Such is the clash of opinions that 'I said/He said' situations throw up.

Frankly, Saiful's accusation would not matter except that Anwar aspires to be prime minister of Malaysia; Muslim voters can be expected to refrain from endorsing him if they suspect he is not straight.

Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad aspires to direct the next Umno president and PM of Malaysia as a result of the present one's hold on the office which now appears to be as shaky as the versions his minions put out to the media on the disappearance, now a month old, of Flight MH370.

Expect that if another month passes and there's no plausible reason for the plane's disappearance such that closure can't be brought to the issue, Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration will begin its descent to the sort of disembarkation that predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's government experienced this time six years ago.

Saving PM Najib

Former deputy prime minister Musa Hitam doesn't want to see Najib's administration ended soon.

He likes the PM and is sympathetic to what he feels this scion of former premier Abdul Razak Hussein, for whom Musa had a lot of respect, is trying to do with the country and is not allowed the manoeuvre room to bring off.

Accordingly, Musa has begun the indelicate business of telling the Umno electorate that the man ominously shaping up to direct things in a post-Najib era cannot be relied upon to tell the truth, particularly on matters affecting Muslim lives and deaths.

Two weeks ago, Musa went all the way to Kota Baru, a place long hospitable to efforts to upend Mahathir, to let loose damaging disclosures about the man's capacity for

dissimulation: in Musa's narrative of the Memali incident of November 1985, he said that PM Mahathir affected to be abroad when actually he was at home.

The Memali incident of some three decades ago came as a big shock to the public.

The deaths of 14 villagers, including their leader Ibrahim Libya, and of four police personnel, in a shootout at Mukim Siong in Baling on the morning of Nov 19, 1985 was a rude surprise to a citizenry familiar only with similar extents of fatalities when tour buses, with faulty brakes or sleep-deprived drivers, careen off high flung roads into ravines.

It was not that the public were unused to sudden bursts of religion-connected violence; one flare-up in 1980 in Batu Pahat and another irruption in 1978 in Kerling in northern Selangor, were enough to apprise them that in obscure recesses of the country, the dormant seeds of religious manias were being nourished.

But the Batu Pahat and Kerling incidents only took a few lives. So 18 deaths on a sinister morning in November 1985 were like a blast of cold water on a frigid day.

After Musa's disclosure that Mahathir was at home up to four days from the day of the incident, Mahathir replied with a familiar equivocation: he said he could not remember if he was around or abroad but would look things up to ascertain the facts.

Meanwhile, a Mahathir flunkey, ex-*Utusan Malaysia* editor Zainuddin Maidin, piped up to say that as far as he could remember he was at Subang airport on the day of the incident to see the PM off to China on a visit.

For good measure Zainuddin recalled that Mahathir wore a look of foreboding at pre-departure rituals.

All the world's a stage

Musa, then, countered with a more detailed narrative than the one he gave to a public forum in the Kelantan capital days earlier.

He said he, together with then acting inspector-general of police Amin Osman, saw Mahathir to brief him on the incident on the very day it happened.

Musa suggested the PM tarry awhile in the country because 18 deaths to Muslims in Mahathir's backyard in Kedah was a grave matter.

Mahathir mulled Musa's latest disclosure before picking the ball up for a punt into touch: he said he could not recall Musa coming to see him to advice that he postpones his trip to China.

He recalled that Musa was among those at the airport the day after the incident to see him off and that Musa had not said anything about delaying the trip.

Also, Mahathir noted that Musa had taken responsibility for the incident which Musa did

by implication at the Kota Baru forum, although the then home minister qualified that he was not in charge of the police operations that preceded the cops' storming the house where Ibrahim Libya and his followers were holed up.

Now this controversy of whether Mahathir was in the country or not during the Memali incident has been settled: Mahathir was indeed in the country although the public did not know this at the material time.

He said he left for China the day after the incident. Musa said he was around till four days after the incident.

This is a classic 'I said/He said' affair save for Musa's disclosure that then acting IGP Amin was in on the discussion he had with the PM.

Will Amin weigh-in on the veracity of Musa's side of the story or on Mahathir's? This morality play is set for more twists and turns.

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