

Unveiling the May 13 riots
Malaysiakini.com
May 11, 2007
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"While people were still assembling for this parade, trouble broke out in the nearby Malay section of Kampung Baru, where two Chinese lorries were burnt...

By 7.15pm, I could see the mobs swarming like bees at the junction of Jalan Raja Muda and Batu Road. More vehicles were smashed and Chinese shophouses set on fire.

The Chinese and Indian shopkeepers of Batu Road formed themselves into a 'district defence force' armed with whatever they find - parangs, poles, iron bars and bottles...

When the Malay invading force withdrew as quickly as it had arrived, the residents took their revenge. Shopfronts and cars suspected of being Malay-owned were smashed or burnt...

The police arrived at about 9pm but did not remain in the area. Later, truck-loads of Federal Reserve Units (riot squads) and the Royal Malay Regiment drove past..."

(Excerpts taken from a dispatch by Far Eastern Economic Review correspondent Bob Reece narrating his eyewitness account on May 13, 1969 after a group of young Malays gathered outside the Selangor Menteri Besar Harun Idris' residence in late afternoon)

It has been almost four decades since the May 13 racial riots broke out.

What had prompted the worst riots in Malaysia's 50-year history that cost the lives of 196 persons (according to official records) however remained shrouded under a veil of secrecy, although there are several versions on the matter so far.

The 'official version' of it has always been the violence was triggered off by the Chinese-dominated opposition supporters' provocation in celebrating their electoral victory which saw the ruling Alliance Party suffered a major setback.

'Full of nonsense'

This version, however was consistently rebutted by the opposition group who claimed otherwise. Other theories also suggested that the riots was rather a planned attack to oust then premier Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The lack of accessible information in the public domain has been a stumbling block for those who intend to uncover the episode but a set of newly-declassified documents in London gave sociologist Dr Kua Kia Soong a thorough glimpse of the event.

Late last year, the principal of New Era College took a three-month sabbatical leave to the Public Records Office in London to study records and declassified documents on the May 13 incident after a 30-year secrecy rule over these documents lapse.

His findings based on the declassified documents - which have been compiled into a new book to be launched on Sunday - found the entire May 13 riots were by no means a spontaneous outburst of racial violence, as it has been portrayed to the Malaysian public.

"The (official) history of May 13 is full of nonsense, it doesn't reveal anything. It pins the blame on the opposition party which was not true, they were not the responsible party," Kua told Malaysiakini in a recent interview.

"My book shows the responsible party were those ascendent state capitalist class (in Umno), elements within that gave rise and implemented this plan. There was a plan based on the people who assembled at the (Selangor) menteri besar's house.

"There are correspondences and intelligence reports which showed that. Official history has to reveal that truth and not to pin the blame on everybody around who are not to be blamed," the educationist and social activist stressed.

Kua maintained the May 13 incident was a coup d'etat against the Tunku by the then emergent Malay state capitalists - backed by the police and army - to seize control of the reign of power from the old aristocrats to implement the new Malay agenda.

A plot to oust Tunku

He opined the riots were works of 'Malay thugs' orchestrated by politicians behind the coup.

For instance, he said the "group of hoodlums suddenly appeared from all over the place" on the day of May 13 to gather at Harun's residence and the questionable conduct of the police and army to just stand by and watch.

He added that documents showed less than a week after the riots, then deputy premier Tun Abdul Razak who headed the National Operations Council was already in full control of the country - an indication that there had been a plot.

On top of that, discussions for future plans had already been carried out.

"For example the National Cultural Policy (announced in 1971) burst in the 80s, it was already been thought of one week after (the May 13 incident)," Kua noted, referring to the controversial policy which placed emphasis on the 'indigenous culture' and Islam.

A secret document from the British cabinet office featured in the book showed that barely a week after the riots broke out, the Central Intelligence Agency had figured out what Tun Razak was planning - "to formalise Malay dominance, sideline the Chinese and shelve the Tunku".

The role of the security forces in the May 13 bloodshed was also questioned in Kua's findings.

"Even at that time, people in the diplomatic core (were wondering) how come the day the riot broke out, Razak met with the chiefs of the police and army but they did not do anything," he said.

Interestingly, Kua pointed out the Malaysian security forces had been tested and tried during the war against the communist insurgency between 1948 and 1960 and earned their reputation.

"They are one of the most effective in putting down the communist insurrection that is a far, far more difficult operation than putting down riot, but they could not put down (such riot) in 1969 for days, for weeks," he questioned.

It thus brought to Kua's conclusion: "The May 13 was a pretext for staging that coup... I am not the first person who said it was a coup d'etat but I am providing the documents to show how it was a coup d'etat."

Exact fatality number unknown

The declassified documents have included reports fielded by foreign correspondents who were in Kuala Lumpur at the time, dispatches by the British High Commission personnel who closely followed the event and various other confidential reports from the diplomat circle.

It is considerably the first time a complete recount of the tragedy is made available to the Malaysian public, as many foreign correspondent reports were previously banned while local documents are inaccessible.

However, what could not be established in the book is another secrecy, the real number of deaths.

Official figures said the May 13 riots claimed 196 lives, 180 were wounded by firearms and 259 by other weapons, 9,143 persons were arrested out of whom 5,561 were charged in court, 6,000 persons rendered homeless, at least 211 vehicles and 753 buildings were destroyed or damaged.

The declassified documents and international correspondents at the time nevertheless have calculated a much higher number of fatalities but an exact number could not be ascertained, although it was common knowledge the victims are majority ethnic Chinese.

Kua said it is his hope to smash two myths with the publication of the book.

"One is racial riot will occur when the Malays are not happy, that's why you need the New Economic Policy, affirmative action policy et cetera, otherwise the Malays will be unhappy and there will be riot.

"This is the first myth we should dismantle as documents showed some people were involved in making it (the May 13) happened with the connivance of the police and army," he stressed.

The second myth, Kua said, is academicians and pluralist theorists who uphold the views that riots and conflicts will occur naturally in multi-racial country.

"I am questioning this. The role of the state is very important at a particular historical conjuncture. Malays, Chinese and Indians don't suddenly decide to fight in conflict, it doesn't happen like that," he said.

Asked on whether there is any fear that the authorities might move to ban the publication of the book, as in the case of a recent ban slapped on a book about the Kampung Medan clashes, Kua responded:

"In the age of the Internet, what does banning a book mean? We can put it on the Web, you can't do anything."