

**Exorcising the ghosts of May 13**  
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**Beh Lih Yi**

The scene was still fresh - how Umno MP Badruddin Amiruldin waved a book on the May 13 riots and warned that questioning Malay rights was akin to stirring a hornet's nest at the Umno general assembly three years ago.

"Don't poke at this nest, for if it were disturbed, these hornets will strike and destroy the country," Badruddin, who was then newly elected as the Umno permanent deputy chairperson had said to a thunderous applause from delegates attending the annual meet.

More recently, similar remarks were also heard.

"Malay rights cannot be challenged, otherwise the Malays will run amok and May 13 will happen all over again in Kuala Lumpur," a Umno Youth Terengganu delegate told the Umno annual meet held less than six months ago.

In fact, these 'ghosts' of the May 13 have never left us since the riots broke out in 1969.

This is why Dr Kua Kia Soong, the author of a new book with an in-depth analysis on the May 13 riots, strongly advocated the formation of a commission of inquiry to let the nation attain the truth over the tragedy.

"Without that, some of these ghosts will linger on forever," he said in a recent interview.

"The inquiry is crucial for national reconciliation - the elusive national unity we talk about, the elusive ethnic relation we want in this country but unless we have that inquiry, we will not get that reconciliation," the academician and social activist added.

### **Wide-reaching impact**

Kua, also ex-ISA detainee and now principal of New Era College in Selangor, has argued in his new book that the May 13 incident was a plot to oust then premier Tunku Abdul Rahman and not spontaneous clashes between Malay and Chinese as official history trying to paint it.

The book was written based on newly declassified documents including foreign dispatches and confidential reports at the time which are now made available in the Public Records Office in London.

Among other findings from these documents that backed his argument was the 'sudden appearance' of a group of 'hoodlums' on the day of the riots, the swift transfer of power from the Tunku to his deputy Tun Abdul Razak and the role of the security forces.

His book is said to contain the first credible account of the incident as no open inquiry has been held by the authority into the May 13 riots so far, making the real causes behind the bloodshed and the exact number of fatalities shrouded under secrecy.

Official figures claiming the loss of 196 lives with over 400 wounded is widely seen as an underestimation.

What is more damaging as a result from the tragedy, said Kua, is that it had set a "dangerous trend of fascism" which continues to prevail up to this day.

"It was fascism in a way how these hoodlums behaved like the fascist movement with the help of the police. It is the worst thing that could happen to Malaysian politics and society.

"We saw it not only in 1969, but in 1987, 1996, etc. It is the biggest destruction of our society," the author said in reference to Umno Youth's role in the 'Operasi Lalang' clampdown in 1987 and the mob which stormed into an international conference on East Timor in 1996.

He argued the May 13 riots also brought wide-reaching impact on the position of Malay special privileges which has changed to the present "disgusting usage of Ketuanan Melayu (Malay dominance)".

### **High time for inquiry**

It is not a new call for an open inquiry, or a truth commission, on the May 13 incident to be conducted but with Kua's latest findings and account on the riots, it is expected to spark a new round of debate over the worst riots in Malaysian history.

Kua stressed efforts to unearth the truth will enable the nation to move on with the episode.

"The commission is a way of exorcising those ghosts, (the incident) is just full of ghosts. The government uses these ghosts every time there is a challenge to the ruling party or the bumiputera policy, these ghosts will be pulled out from the past, the May 13.

"But it is not these ghosts who are responsible, the responsible people were those responsible for the coup d'etat. We can even point one finger at (ex-Selangor menteri besar) Harun Idris, he has to answer for a lot of things. He had passed on but others who were with him, are still alive," Kua said.

For the author, it is still possible for the inquiry to be carried out even after about four decades because it is considered 'recent history'.

"They could use hospital records to give an idea who were the victims, those injured, (press releases) from the Malaysian Red Cross, pull up these people and ask them. There are many ways of doing it but the further we go in time, it will be more and more difficult," Kua said.

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