

Academics at odds over May 13 book
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A fast-selling new book on the May 13 racial riots has not only caused ripples among government figures, but several academics interviewed voiced varied concerns surrounding the nature of the book.

Authored by Dr Kua Kia Soong, the book 'May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969' provides an alternative account of the tragic event and is facing a possible ban.

A day after the book hit the shelves, three senators called for action to be taken against the book and Kua, while Deputy Internal Security Minister Fu Ah Kiow said the ministry was studying the contents to decide on a course of action.

Ten copies of the book have already been confiscated for "studying" by the Internal Security Ministry from a major bookstore chain in Kuala Lumpur.

In response, Prof Shamsul Amri Baharuddin of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and the head of the Ethnic Relations Module drafting committee said there was no need to jump to conclusions on the book.

"They should read the book first and make judgement later. It's a bad habit among Malaysians," he said when contacted.

Similarly, former World Bank analyst Dr Lim Teck Ghee said the government reaction towards the book was counterproductive and that a ban would eventually be circumvented by electronic communication.

"It will further reinforce the public perception that the government has much to hide or cover up in this watershed event of Malaysian history.

"It would have been more strategic for the Government to quietly and discreetly buy up all the copies of the book and bury or burn them," said Lim, who is also a former United Nations regional advisor.

Dispute over content

(A paper titled 'Corporate Equity Distribution: Past Trends and Future Policy' which Lim was involved in, was also the subject of controversy because the paper challenged government data on bumiputera corporate equity ownership. Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (Asli), where Lim headed its Centre of Public Policy Studies, later cowed to government pressure and withdrew the study. Lim resigned in protest over Asli's move)

Lim considers the book important as he described it as "unbiased information" on the May 13 incident which the government much acknowledge.

Kua had spent three-months researching recently declassified documents at the Public Records Office in London and concluded that the 1969 riots were not spontaneous racial outburst but a planned coup attempt by 'Malay capitalist' against then premier Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Reknowned historian Prof Khoo Kay Khim however expressed caution over the book and questions the validity of the sources cited.

"I don't think he got very much. If he had access to (police) Special Branch files he might probably get more accurate information," said Khoo.

He asserts that the 1969 riots took place after cumulative years of racial tension, while Kua's book was mainly focused on the event itself.

Khoo also warned that the allegations made in the book could stoke racial sentiments.

"I have been told that (Kua) named certain leaders as people responsible for the riots. That of course can lead to all kind of unpredictable responses since the leaders he named were apparently not Chinese but Malay. It creates a difficult situation in our fragile society," he added.

On possible action taken by the authorities, Khoo said the authorities should have monitored the progress of the book earlier rather than reacting after the book was published.

"But then people will be unhappy that (such actions curb) freedom of speech, which is a very relative thing. People have to be careful (in dealing with such matters)," he said.

On Sunday, former Universiti Malaya sociology and anthropology professor Dr Syed Husin Ali told a forum at the launch of Kua's book that the riots were not a coup attempt but a result of certain Umno leaders taking advantage of the party's weakened leadership.

Meant for public consumption

When asked about the contribution of Kua's book to academic discourse on the subject, Shamsul said that based purely on news reports on the matter, he did not technically consider the book academic material.

"Two conditions must be met - there must be two referees and that the book must be published by recognised publisher (of academic material).

"For me, I think he is a public intellectual concerned about issues whether (the general) May 13 interpretation is correct. I think it is a good thing to do. The real question is whether people agree or not with his analysis," said Shamsul.

Kua when contacted said his books meets academic expectations, but it was published for public consumption.

"At the same time it needs to meet my needs of having a political position with an analysis," said Kua, a former DAP MP for Bukit Bintang and currently principal for New Era College in Kajang.

He said his book was not meant to be an exhaustive take on the May 13 incident and that the only way to uncover the truth of the matter was through an independent inquiry.

"In the postscript of my book, I appealed for eyewitness accounts, from friends and relatives of victims, with oral history and details of what happened. This is the beginning of how the

people will get the bigger picture," added Kua.

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