

**Court victory a feather in cap for Uthaya
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COMMENT The High Court award of RM1.4 million in negligence compensation to the widow of Mohd Anuar Sharip who died in police custody 11 years ago is a signal feather in the cap of the lawyer, P Uthayakumar, who first took up Anuar's cause.

NONE Uthayakumar has been the leading advocate of those who have died in police custody in recent years.

Because the vast majority of the dead were Indian Malaysians, Uthayakumar's taking up cudgels on their behalf had a parochial tint.

His passionate advocacy of the Hindraf cause did not help to reduce that veneer.

But with his espousal of Anuar Sharip's cause and with its culmination in a court awarded quantum of compensation that's reasonable, the parochial veneer to Uthayakumar's advocacy no longer applies.

Yesterday judicial commissioner Lee Swee Seng, on appeal by Anuar's widow, delivered a judgment that raised the quantum of compensation from a dismal RM137,220 to a gratifying RM1.4 million.

A sentence from justice Lee's judgment rang with magisterial pith and moment:

"Let the message go forth from this place that any more deaths in police custody is too many. Everyone, whether a drug addict or a decent person, should be treated with dignity and respect."

These terms, if referenced to a cause that was fought by lawyers allied to Pakatan Rakyat, would have been a major boost to the prestige of the coalition's struggle for reform of the Malaysian polity.

Yesterday's court award brightens the legal prospects for a measure of gratification for families of the custodial dead whose numbers have reached distressingly high levels in recent years.

This victory can now be reasonably credited to Uthayakumar's espousal of the suspiciously dead while in police custody.

Need to collaborate with Hindraf

The lightly known fact that Anuar Sharip was a PKR supporter lends added sheen to the bona fides of Uthayakumar, no fan of PKR's or for that matter, Pakatan Rakyat.

That and the outcome of Anuar's case make it more imperative than ever that Pakatan moves to collaborate with Hindraf in the run-up to the next general election, expected in the first half of next year.

Admittedly, the path towards that is fraught with immense difficulty, not least because of Uthayakumar who can be intractable.

Pakatan must prevent him from becoming the 'Ralph Nader of Malaysian politics'.

Nader is the consumer advocate and sometime presidential candidate whose blend of ego and self-righteousness made him a liability to progressive causes in US politics.

If Pakatan finds negotiations with Hindraf formidably difficult, then just leave the Uthayakumar-targeted Batu Kawan parliamentary constituency to him to contest and give DAP, the current holder of the ward, a seat that's nominally PKR's.

This isn't craven appeasement. It's political realism, more so after yesterday's court award to the family of Anuar Sharip.

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