

**Zam - Umno man first, journalist second**  
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COMMENT The return of former information minister Zainuddin Maidin to the political fray has drawn attention to a recurring theme behind the broadside he launched against PAS on Umno Online website.

This theme reverberates each time a new controversy flares in national politics.

There are variations on how one could frame this theme but essentially it can be rendered thus: "Who are the real racists in Malaysia?"

azlanZainuddin recalls that in the immediate aftermath of the May 13, 1969 riots PAS leaders were flagrantly racist.

Zainuddin cited the pressure PAS leaders allegedly brought to bear on then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to seize the economic assets of the Chinese.

Already a senior reporter for Utusan Malaysia during that period, Zainuddin had a ringside view of the goings-on, and now purports to tell some.

How true his recall it is hard to verify because so few participants in the drama have left written records of their reminiscences.

Malaysian politicians are indifferent memoirists: few care to help build the historical record from grist provided by their recollections.

Historians are going to struggle to reconstruct past events because of the thinness of the available 'I was a witness' material, from participants and bystanders.

Zainuddin as reportorial bystander can't be faulted for this lack; his columns in the Utusan, albeit intermittent, were revelatory about what he witnessed.

But there can be some cavils about his objectivity - Zainuddin was an Umno man first and a journalist second. Still, it's good he recalls as it serves to place things in perspective.

Baying for Tunku's blood

His disclosure about the position of PAS leaders in the immediate aftermath of May 13 must to be placed against a larger backdrop.

In the immediate aftermath of May 13, the Young Turks in Umno were baying for Tunku's blood as he was seen as insufficiently sensitive to the urgency of lifting the Malays out of widespread poverty.

Among this circle were Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Musa Hitam, Daim Zainuddin and Abdullah Ahmad, to cite the names of a few.

abdul samad ismail zainuddin maidin 210206 laughsThe more intellectual among the Young Turks sought ideas on Malay regeneration from A Samad Ismail (far right), then the editor of Berita Harian, a newspaper under the stable of Singapore-owned Straits Times.

Samad and James Puthucheary enjoyed a friendship going back to the days before they became the convenors of the People's Action Party (PAP), formed in Singapore in November 1954.

Intellectually, they were head and shoulders above the run of the mill among the political class in Singapore and Malaya between the end of the Second World War and the May 13 riots. Some among Umno's Young Turks had recourse to both.

Samad steered the more questing - for economic ideas, that is - to Puthucheary, a partner in the then leading Kuala Lumpur law firm of Skrine & Company.

Puthucheary's grasp of economics was legendary because of a seminal work he authored in 1960, entitled 'Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy'.

Its thesis upended a popular misconception that the economy was under the control of the Chinese. Ownership had adduced the proof that it was in the thrall of expatriates.

The true racists

James Puthucheary, who died in April 2000, had told people who knew him that from among Umno's Young Turks, seething with frustration over Malay poverty in the aftermath of May 13, were people who were clamouring for the seizure of Chinese business assets.

Puthucheary advised against that course and suggested ways and means of poverty alleviation that were not racially-hued and that became the initial substance of the New Economic Policy, a noble scheme for national advancement.

Really, the true racists in the Malaysian context are not the people who clamoured for the appropriation of Chinese business assets in May 13's aftermath or such other irrationalities as periodically convulse a people caught in history's rapids.

Rather, the true racists are those who are uncomfortable with political realities such as the one about the NEP actually having non-Malay authorship so that they can say gratitude and its feudal concomitant - political allegiance - are owed them by the uplifted classes.

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