

Samy Vellu - a subaltern and survivor departs
Malaysiakini.com
Disember 7, 2010

COMMENT Not with a bang but with a whimper did S Samy Vellu end yesterday his 31-year reign as MIC supremo.

Someone who has lasted this long without expiring in office is usually accorded a send-off reserved for deceased monarchs. Instead Samy Vellu exited stage left in a hush that tended to cast doubt on whether the departure was for real.

mic agm 110710 s samy vellu 1The man was nothing if not a great survivor, able to overcome any calamity that befell him.

Someone who could outlast the gravitational pull of scandals - think of Maika's failure and the Telecom shares scam - could be expected to tough out the death knell sounded by his defeat as MP for Sungai Siput in the tsunami of March 2008.

But even Samy Vellu, who ruled the MIC for three decades like some force of nature, had to accede to the reality that survivors, however durable, ultimately wind up as bores, insufferable when they persist in not knowing that the joke is on them.

That Samy Vellu had difficulty knowing the difference between reality and its fictive renditions in movies was illustrated by an incident that happened at an annual dinner of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam in the late 1990s.

'All Hindus are thugs'

He was guest of honour and spoke in English. This was at a time when the shooting deaths of Indian Malaysians in encounters with the police were beginning to deeply distress the community.

Eleven deaths, including that of a pregnant woman, in one encounter in Puchong accentuated an already beleaguered sense of isolation, specially felt in the lower reaches of that society. (Hindraf's demonstration of November of 2007 was already in gestation.)

In the late 1990s the MIC president was under pressure to assuage things.

Instead, at the Hindu Sangam dinner, Samy Vellu shocked his audience with this utterance: "All Hindus are thugs."

The remark was spoken in a nonchalant manner, leaving a hushed audience wondering, at first blush, if indeed they had correctly heard what was said.

Now, most sentient people know that even the most enlightened of persons give vent to wild notions. The question is whether such idle fancies reflect the speaker's true feelings or just momentary excess.

Within five minutes of his initial utterance of the slur against Hindus on an occasion hosted by their grandees, Samy Vellu repeated the insult: "All Hindus are thugs."

At this a youngish member of the audience approached the stage on which Samy Vellu was speaking, in an apparent attempt at robust remonstrance. Samy's security detail interposed.

When the MIC president was leaving the gathering, the young man, this time shouting his protestations, moved in the direction of the departing guest. Security personnel once again tamped down the threat.

Umno's point man

What had prompted Samy Vellu to utter and repeat the slur, at a time when the community was feeling keenly the enormity of the shooting deaths of its younger set, was explicable only in relation to what had passed for muster from time to time among some BN component leaders.

Think of former Gerakan president Lim Keng Yaik's musings in public over what Indian tappers did behind rubber trees, remarks he was forced to retract and apologise for.

Or of Keng Yaik's gratuitous insult to the Hainanese community at whose community dinner one year in Kuala Terengganu he said in Mandarin that they don't seem to be like humans and neither like devils.

This sort of gibberish would, in the more mature democracies of the world, see the speaker withdraw from public life in penitential disgrace.

But public life in Malaysia is more forgiving and offers hamsters plenty of second acts.

And so Samy Vellu survived the threat of being hoist with his own petard against the Hindus, a community he nominally would represent as the MIC leader.

The main reason for this was that he was a useful subaltern to Umno's plutocratic elite as works minister in the era of Malaysia's infrastructure boom when there were construction contracts aplenty to be handed out.

Barring one or two shaky overpasses and a leaky roof in Parliament, this overseer's job that Samy Vellu assayed for Umno's elite was seen to be effectively done.

It helped the public charade of deception that the point man was from MIC, not Umno.

If the subaltern helped himself to the pickings, and the community he represented suffered as a result, well that, as they say in the military, was so much collateral damage.

TERENCE NETTO has been a journalist for close on four decades. He likes the occupation because it puts him in contact with the eminent without being under the necessity to admire them. It is the ideal profession for a temperament that finds power fascinating and its exercise abhorrent.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.

Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/150149>