

Supposed 'hero' vs a 'true hero'
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OPINION The former chief of Bukit Bendera Umno, Ahmad Ismail, was honoured with titles and proclaimed a 'Malay hero'. He was conferred two heroic titles: the Wira Bangsa Melayu and Bintang Perkasa Melayu Jati.

After an hour long wait, typical of people who have little respect for others, the arrival of the 'hero' resembled a wedding procession complete with bunga manggar and the drum-beat of the kompang. The only thing that appeared to be missing was the bride.

The night's jollity which was attended by around 150 delegates from 23 branches included a silat performance and the obligatory sheathing and unsheathing of the keris.

Boys will be boys and they will show off their weapons in an act of assumed bravado.

To the uninformed, the controversial Ahmad Ismail, our new 'hero', was suspended by Umno in late 2008, for three years, after he referred to non-Malays as "pendatang" (foreigners).

He described Malaysian Chinese as 'squatters' and cautioned them not to emulate the 'Jews in America'. As expected, the suspension was later lifted by Umno, last December.

His racist comments aroused the memories of inter-ethnic tensions and threatened the government led by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, at the time. Badawi suspended Ahmad and barred him from any political posts as punishment.

There were protests from members of the BN coalition who threatened to withdraw their membership. Even the armed forces chief warned that 'stern action must be taken to prevent' racial conflicts.

As a consequence of Ahmad Ismail's ill-timed, ill-judged and unacceptable comments, the journalist who reported his comments was taken away by the police under the orders of the Internal Security Act (ISA), ostensibly for her personal safety.

The supposed hero, Ahmad Ismail, managed to threaten the security of a country, challenged the authority of the Prime Minister at the time, almost wrecked the BN coalition, caused strife and anger in the Malaysian public, caused the army to be on possible alert, insulted various people (Jews, Americans, Chinese, Malays), rekindled horrific memories of racial riots, threatened the fragile peace and security of a nation, exposed the hypocrisy of the police actions and the political abuse of the use of the ISA.

Is this Bukit Bendera's idea of a hero? Someone who divides, insults and is unapologetic in his actions? Someone who has no respect for others? Someone who was prepared to hold his leader and his country to ransom? Someone who is ignorant of history?

Please allow me to show an example of a 'true hero' .

My choice of a hero is Dr. Karen Woo, a British doctor who was murdered by the Taliban and the Hizb-i-Islami group last Thursday. She was killed, with eight other doctors as they returned from months working in the Nuristan region, a remote area in the north east of Afghanistan. They had gone to set up a clinic and provide free medical help to the people

there. They did not have 5-star accommodation or even luxury cars. They lived a spartan life and conducted part of their journey on horseback.

Dr. Woo gave up a lucrative career in private medicine to join a humanitarian aid effort. She combined her love of travelling with her medical work. Before Afghanistan, she had also worked in hospitals in Australia, Papua New Guinea and Trinidad and Tobago.

Although she had joined the International Assistance Mission, a Christian charity, Dr. Woo found time to make a documentary about Kabul, a city which she grew to love. She even started the Bridge Afghanistan charity with Firuz Rahimi, a journalist, to improve the lives of ordinary Afghan people.

According to Dr. Woo's family, she was "a humanist and had no religious or political agenda. Her motivation was purely humanitarian. She wanted the ordinary people of Afghanistan, especially the women and children to receive health care."

Dr. Woo, who once dreamt of being a professional dancer, was briefly a model and even joined a flying circus performing stunts strapped to the wing of a biplane.

Encouraged by her mother, a psychiatric nurse, she turned to medicine and worked in various places around the world. She returned to London and worked as a surgeon and as a medical director in private medicine, before embarking on the humanitarian work in Afghanistan.

Her life was full of inspiration, adventure, travel and charity. She, like her other colleagues who died alongside her, were committed, caring, compassionate and courageous. She helped women and children who were in need of medical attention.

She bridged the gap between the sick and the healthy, the east and west, the criminals and caring people. Dr. Woo, who I am assuming is possibly a non-Muslim, helped the Muslim people in Badakhshan and Nuristan provinces.

In two weeks time, 36 year-old Karen Woo would have been married to her fiancé. His last act of love was to identify her body, which had been shot twice, and then to bury her.

She leaves behind her parents, an English mother and Chinese father, and her two brothers to mourn their loss, in England. A whole nation which depended on medical programs, provided by humanitarian workers like her, is in jeopardy. Thousands of people are now, unable to receive a continuation of her medical expertise.

The tragedy of this young woman was that in helping to save lives in remote, Taliban infested, Afghanistan, she made the ultimate sacrifice.

If you ask me, Dr. Karen Woo is my 'true hero'.

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