

Are we still afraid the Commies are out to get us or is it really an issue of control?

A few days ago filmmaker Amir Muhammad's appeal against the banning of his film *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* was rejected. The film cannot now be shown in Malaysia, though it will be seen in many other countries: at the 20th Singapore International Film Festival on April 21st, and at nine other festivals around the world, at the last count.

Apa Khabar Orang Kampung (its English title is *Village People Radio Show*) is a documentary about the Malay Communist guerrillas now living in southern Thailand. It is a sequel of sorts to Amir's 2006 film *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (*The Last Communist*), which was also banned in Malaysia. The full saga of the films' banning unfolds on the website *last-communist.blogspot.com* and so I will not recount it here.

I caught *The Last Communist* in the cinema in Singapore. It is a masterful and mature film, and my wife and I left the theatre feeling very moved.

"It really makes you proud of Malaysia – and proud to be Malaysian," my wife said, and she was right. It is a profoundly patriotic work, and its banning is misguided and regrettable.

I know Amir only slightly, and while we are on friendly terms, I cannot claim to be friends with him; I also cannot be accused of being friends with him. There is no personal bias at work, therefore, when I say that *The Last Communist* is a hugely important film.

Impressive in both the breadth

Emerging from the Emergency

The Star - 25/3/2007



An undated photo showing a 'white area' in Malacca which was cleared of the communist threat, while guerillas still operated in 'black areas'. Looks like we still may have 'grey areas' today!

and depth of its insight, the documentary is only tangentially a look at the life of Communist leader Chin Peng; it is much more of a love letter to the joyous complexity and diversity of present-day Malaysia. Amir travels around the country interviewing people in towns and villages somehow connected to the life of the guerrilla leader. The resulting rich and idiosyncratic tapestry – seemingly random but very much the product of the filmmaker's assured editing and narrative sense – is every bit as monumental as Rehman Rashid's *Malaysian Journey* or Lat's *Town Boy*.

I have yet to see *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung*, but I imagine that it is a similarly valuable work; taken

together, the banning of the two films is a great loss to the country.

Notwithstanding the official reasons given, I believe that at the heart of the authorities' discomfort with Amir's films is the issue of who is allowed to construct the history of Malaysia.

As George Orwell wrote in 1984, "Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past." That is why, across the world, those in power are anxious to silence those who tell parallel, complementary, or alternative histories.

But are there really so few acceptable narratives of colonial rule and the independence struggle? Must every history have UMNO

as its central character – as the hero – to be considered acceptable? In celebrating the contribution of Malay patriots like Tunku Abdul Rahman in our children's school-books, must we do so at the expense of the contributions of other communities?

Will the fabric of our nation really be rent asunder if we acknowledge that the terrorism of the Communists, though morally repugnant, did contribute to Britain's willingness to relinquish Malaya? I asked Amir if he thought that suppressing stories of the Communists was a holdover of our Emergency mentality, or was it part of a wider attempt to restrict how we think about Malaysia's origins?

"I think the authorities just find it convenient to psychologically prolong the Emergency," he replied, via email. "Malaysia still has a few Emergency-style laws, including the notorious Internal Security Act which was supposed to be a temporary thing. The curbing of judicial review in 1988 also has an Emergency feel to it. It's a lot easier to control the masses if you tell them they are constantly 'under threat' and this has been the logic of governance for decades. People who are afraid are those who won't question."

Malaysia, therefore, still refuses



to see the Emergency as history – as a past event that can be contested and re-examined, retold and laid to rest. We have yet to find an enemy as convenient as the Communist Party of Malaya: despite being demonised, neither the Indonesian illegal immigrants, the KMM nor, indeed, Ayah Pin's Teapot Cultists have quite risen to the task of being Psychological Enemy Number One. And so the Commie, long after laying down his weapons, soldiers on in our psyches, a creaking octogenarian still apparently ready to pounce.

So long as we continue to fight the Emergency in our heads, not only do we suppress our democratic freedoms, we blunt and dull what should be our keenest sense: our sense of Malaysia as a vibrant, variegated, amazing land, rich in ways that no tourism campaign can ever capture.

Only when we repeal the proclamation of the state of emergency can we truly begin to think of our history as our history; only when we see our history as what is past can we begin to grapple with the present – and embrace the future.

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