



A Kuala Lumpur street is deserted after curfew was imposed during the riots in 1969. This picture was taken two days after the May 13 clashes.

The tragedy of May 13, 1969

The Sun - 26/7/2007

by Zainon Ahmad
merdeka@thesunday.com

WHEN in 1968 the Alliance began preparations for a renewal of its mandate which was due to end in 1969, little did it suspect what the results would unlock.

As far as it was concerned, the 1969 general election was to be a routine affair, and there was no doubt in the mind of Alliance leaders that it would win as decisively as it did in 1964.

After all, the cancer that was Singapore had been cast off in 1965, the economy was happily humming, the Indonesian confrontation had just ended and diplomatic relations with the Southeast Asian giant re-established, and the opposition was weak and fragmented.

The Alliance boasted that it could easily win more than two thirds of the 144 seats in the Dewan Rakyat or about two thirds of the 104 Peninsular Malaysia seats, capture Kelantan, and retain control of all the other state legislatures.

But that confidence was shattered in the early hours of May 11, 1969 when the results of the May 10 elections were known.

The Alliance had won only 66 seats, down from the 89 it won in 1964. It also lost Penang, failed to capture Kelantan, and came close to losing Perak, Selangor, Kedah and Terengganu.

The Opposition was surprised, too. The DAP, which reconstituted itself from the People's Action Party (PAP), won 15 seats when the Singapore-based party had only one in 1964. PAS got 12 seats, an increase of three; PPP won four, an increase of two; while the new party Gerakan won eight.

Even though the Alliance had not lost power – and Sabah and Sarawak had yet to decide – the Malays were alarmed.

They felt that the government they had dominated all this while was going to collapse.

During the Alliance meeting held to assess the results, a number of Malay representatives blamed the losses on the MCA which saw 20 of its 33 candidates defeated. Hurt and weak, the MCA announced on May 15 that it

would not participate in the government at federal and state levels.

What appeared as punishment of the MCA by Umno became an additional factor contributing to further racial tensions and anxieties.

Opposition supporters, especially the Chinese and Indians who had voted for the DAP and Gerakan were jubilant. And they showed it.

They celebrated their "victories" by marching through Kuala Lumpur and in their exuberance shouted insulting epithets at Malays living near the city fringes. They even showed vulgar gestures at Malay women.

On May 12, Gerakan got police permission for 1,000 party members and supporters to hold their own demonstrations that evening.

Word got around quickly and the number swelled to 4,000 which later broke up into smaller groups that conducted their own "demonstrations" away from the restraint of party leaders.



Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, and their wives pose at a Hari Raya open house at Razak's Sri Taman house in 1973. Razak succeeded Tunku in 1970 as prime minister.

They, too, taunted the Malays with insults, using similar words that had been hurled by the previous day's demonstrators, such as: "*Melayu balik kampung, kita sudah berkuasa sekarang*" ("Malays, return to your villages, we are now in power") and "*Hey Sakai bolih balik ke hutan*" ("Hey Sakai, you can return to the jungle").

Meanwhile, groups of Malays from outside Kuala Lumpur gathered at Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Harun Idris' house in Kampung Baru. They urged Harun to lead a victory demonstration to show they had not lost power.

Before long, it was announced a demonstration would begin from Harun's house at 7.30pm on May 15.

Violence started at about 6pm that day when about 100 Malays from Gombak made their way through Setapak – the scene of the previous evening's demonstrations – carrying banners and shouting slogans.

Soon, street clashes broke out between them and Chinese and Indian youths. Parang, sticks and iron pipes were used.

Most of the Malay demonstrators made it to Harun's house where exaggerated versions of what happened had already reached the 5,000 people gathered there.

They were in an ugly mood. When some Chinese and Indians in a passing bus made some taunting remarks at them, the vehicle was attacked. By 6.40pm, the first three Chinese lay dead beside the road.

Word of what happened in Setapak and Kampung Baru spread and within hours the whole city was engulfed in communal rioting the size of which had never been experienced by the country before.

The worst of the rioting burned itself out during that first night.

On May 14, a state of Emergency was declared and Parliament was suspended indefinitely. On May 16, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman set up the National Operations Council (NOC) to rule the country by decree with his deputy, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, as director of operations.

Spöradic small clashes continued after May 14 and they fizzled out only after about a month. The last serious outbreak was between Malays and Indians on June 28 in Kuala Lumpur in which five people were killed.

In January 1970, Tun Razak set up a National Consultative Council to find ways to promote and strengthen racial harmony so that normalcy would return and Parliament restored.

On Sept 21, the Tunku retired as prime minister, depressed and sad that the racial harmony he had devoted much of his political life to strengthen had collapsed under his watch.

Tun Razak succeeded Tunku as the country's second prime minister, and eventually the NOC came to an end after 21 months, and Parliament convened again on Feb 23, 1971.

Why did it happen?

It was bound to happen and was waiting to happen.

Much of the underlying causes could have been resolved early, and some of the symptoms could have been heeded to nip the problem before it conflagrated.

In fact, even as early as the 1959 general election when there was much racial tension within the Alliance and outside of it, some observed that the country's worst enemy was not the communists in the jungles but communalism in the cities.

Beginning with the communist terrorist activities against the Malays after the Japanese surrender, to the Malayan Union where the non-Malays were happy with the rights they got, to the Federation of Malaya where they lost much of these rights and the Malays had their special rights entrenched, communalism festered.

It reared its ugly head prior to the 1955 general election, during the drafting of the national constitution, and prior to the 1959 elections.

The various rights – Malay special rights, citizenship rights, language, culture and education – were publicly debated when the People's Action Party (PAP) participated in Malaysian politics after Singapore joined Malaysia in 1963.

Because the Alliance participated in the Singapore elections in 1963, the PAP participated in the federal elections in 1964 and told the Chinese not to vote for MCA for betraying them to the Malays.

Preparations were made to defeat the PAP in the Singapore elections scheduled for 1967. Malaysian radio and televisions accused the PAP of undermining racial harmony, while Singapore radio and television called for a "Malaysian Malaysia", meritocracy and the removal of quotas.

Following the 1965 ouster of Singapore from Malaysia, much of the discussion on these issues were somewhat muffled. But all stops were pulled during the five week campaign period before polling day on May 10, 1969.

Bloody incidents were also not new to the country. Beginning with the January 1957 incident in Penang where four people were killed, there were minor clashes between small groups of Malays and Chinese long before 1969.

But the foretaste of the communal violence to come erupted in November 1967 in Penang where political demonstrations eventually spread to Perak and Kedah, resulting in 25 people being killed.

Meanwhile, the DAP and the newly formed Gerakan grew into formidable rivals. Where the Alliance thought the general election was a walkover, it suddenly had to contend with these two parties which attracted Chinese and Indian voters in droves.

During the long campaign period, the DAP spoke quite unreservedly about a Malaysian Malaysia. It targeted the MCA for letting down the Chinese with the passing of the National Language Act 1967 and for accepting the use of Malay as the sole medium of instruction in school.

Gerakan felt strongly that the special Malay rights and the language policy in schools were inequitable to other races.

The MCA and MIC had to defend the Alliance stand, while Umno had to fend off PAS's allegations that it was "selling out the Malays to the immigrant races".

The Labour Party, allegedly communist infiltrated, did not participate in the elections but were busy organising demonstrations against the government. Just a fortnight before polling day, an Umno member was murdered, allegedly by a Labour Party member. Tensions ran high but was quickly contained.

Ten days later, police shot dead a Labour Party member for resisting arrest in Kuala Lumpur. The party applied for a police permit to hold a funeral procession on May 10 – polling day.

Permission, however, was granted for May 9. About 10,000 people took part and they flouted every police instruction, including the routes they were supposed to take.

They passed through the heart of Kuala Lumpur and clogged up traffic on almost every street. They carried the Red Flag and portraits of Mao-zedong and sang *The East is Red*.

They provoked Malay bystanders with shouts of "*Malai si!*" ("Death to the Malays!") and "*Hutang darah dibayar darah*" ("Blood debts will be repaid with blood").

It was to the credit of the Royal Malaysian Police that nothing ugly happened that day. But it set the stage and primed the mood for what was to happen following the "celebrations" on May 11 and 12.

While it is a dark blot in the nation's history, Malaysians – old and young – will never be allowed to forget May 13. Mostly, it is used to scare people away from public discussions and debate on such subjects as citizenship, education, culture and religion.

We are constantly reminded of the incident so that we will refrain from questioning the regime in place, from saying things about it or doing things that may be construed as undermining racial harmony and national unity.

Many are agreed that Malaysians should also treat May 13 as a lasting reminder of the danger of disregarding the Merdeka Constitution and of playing about with the sensitivities, customs and traditions of the country's various ethnic groups.