

Exorcising ghost of Oct 27, 1987

It was one of the darkest days in Malaysian history, but we must never forget Ops Lalang - and never allow it to be repeated.

It was an exciting night, yet a tragic one.

Exciting for journalists, who were enthralled by what was going on; but tragic for the victims of one of the biggest purges in the country.

On this day 36 years ago, police stormed into houses, picking up shocked people who never saw the crackdown coming.

Lawyers, politicians and government critics, both male and female, were all being arrested and taken away.

By the end of the day, more than 100 people were behind bars.

Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Ops Lalang was under way.

There was no public information on who was being arrested and newspapers had to reach out to sources and relatives of victims to find out.

Many outspoken people were calling journalists to find out if their names were on the list while many journalists feared that they would themselves be on the list.

Several even went into hiding.

The following day, Oct 28, 1987, *The Star* produced what would be the iconic newspaper of the day.

The word **DETAINED** was splashed across the front page with mugshots of all those known to have been arrested.

Then, things turned tragic for journalists, too. *The Star*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and Malay weekly *Watan* were closed down.

There were accusations that *The Star* had been racist in run-

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ning only pictures of non-Malays on its front page.

The problem was - no one had any idea that a few Malays had been picked up too until the list was released the next day.

Everywhere, there were faces of shock; it was unprecedented. Never had there been such a muzzling of the media since Merdeka in 1957.

There were tears, with people trying to come to terms with what was happening. What followed was five months of oppression and difficulty.

Some jobless journalists were forced to sell pizza, burgers or Western food. A few left to work in Singapore and Hong Kong.

I was a carpenter, a daily-wage earner working to set up a snooker centre, which was the rage then. My wife was selling lottery tickets.

We had just been married, we were broke and had to survive.

In Penang, employers refused to take in the journalists.

They feared they would go back once *The Star* reopened. They had



no place for temps.

In Kuala Lumpur, however, some journalists found alternative work. The employers were sympathetic.

But almost everyone held out hope that *The Star* would one day reopen.

Many employees faithfully turned up at the office every day, hoping for good news. Board games like Risk helped them overcome their boredom.

Finally, five months later, on March 26, *The Star* reopened. But things would never be the same again.

The Printing and Publishing Permits Act was amended to keep the media in check, the Police Act was revised to regulate peaceful assemblies.

These were again re-amended

much later - after Dr Mahathir had left office - to bring them up to modern times.

Meanwhile, many were held at the Kamunting detention camp until April of 1989, almost a year and a half. Some detainees complained of ill-treatment.

Consumers Association of Penang's Meenakshi Raman, then a young lawyer-activist, was in solitary confinement for 47 days.

When she was taken home after her release, she broke down and cried.

She was never charged with a crime, but she has since felt even more strongly about civil liberties and remains an activist to this day.

It has been 35 years now and a distant memory for many, but why did it happen?

The official reason was that racial tensions were too high and had to be cooled down. Chinese educationists had been angered by the transfer of headmasters and held a rally. Malay groups staged a counter-rally, making things tense.

But other things were also happening. The global economy was collapsing and ours was among the worst hit.

Malaysia had been in deep recession since 1985 and *The Star* had reported it with a headline "We are in bad shape".

Dr Mahathir, then the Umno president, was facing a challenge from Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and his deputy Datuk (now Tun) Musa Hitam.

The crackdown turned out to be quite convenient.

With the media tamed, Umno's de-registration and subsequent rebirth as Umno Baru all happened without any dissent.

The economy was hardly discussed in public forums. And when things finally looked up, Dr Mahathir was firmly entrenched in his position.

He maintains he never ordered the crackdown but he was both Prime Minister and Home Minister at that time.

It seems hardly likely that the police went ahead without the say-so from someone holding either of those portfolios.

Now, 35 years later, there has been change, but very little.

It was only after the retirement of Dr Mahathir, and with the gentler Datuk Seri (now Tun) Abdullah Ahmad Badawi taking over, that the media industry started to be vibrant again.

The irony of it all was that Dr Mahathir, who later left Umno in a huff, had to seek out the so-called "alternative media" to have his voice heard.

The mainstream media - which he had cowed - no longer had time for him.

Still, Dr Mahathir remains a loud voice in the country. Unlike those he once stifled, he still gets his say without the fear of being jailed.

This is the new Malaysia - a nation where the ghost of Oct 27, 1987 has to be exorcised for good, to never rise again.