

'Dr M present during Memali' claim reverberates
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The claim by former deputy prime minister Musa Hitam that his boss, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, was at the time of the Memali incident in November 1985 at home and not abroad is a matter of reverberating significance.

What Musa's motives are for making such a claim - and that, too, almost 29 years after the incident - are not as important as the truth of the claim in itself.

We can expect that the combative former prime minister will respond with alacrity to Musa's claims which were made at a forum in Kota Bharu on Thursday night.

It would be interesting what Mahathir says in response to Musa's claims because the latter is not someone given to irresponsible statement.

Musa is not known to be inventive with the truth but he is not known to be elucidating either.

He will be 80 next month, but there are only telltale signs of a memoir in the works though it has been 28 long years since his resignation as deputy prime minister in February 1986.

Indirection is the mode in Malay political discourse, a motif that inhibits candid disclosure and, you could say, memoir-writing.

That and the Islamic command to forgive combine to retard the work of historical reconstruction which is necessary for those who come after to make any sense of what had taken place in the past.

Without this coming to terms with history, citizens are at the mercy of demagogues and charlatans with an attitude towards history much like Humpty Dumpty's towards language: "A word (read history) is anything I say it means."

One of nation's most violent incidents

Musa's assertion that the then prime minister was in Malaysia and not in China during the time of the Memali incident, which occurred on Nov 19, 1985, is a momentous one.

There were 18 deaths in the Memali incident, 14 of them incurred by Ibrahim Libya and his followers and four were to police personnel.

Ibrahim - the 'Libya' sobriquet was acquired from his tertiary education in that country - was a religious cult leader who had a following in Baling, Kedah.

On the morning of Nov 19, police surrounded the hamlet where he and followers had set up a commune.

Police wanted Ibrahim to surrender but a standoff resulted and when the cops charged the compound of his house, shooting broke out, leaving 18 dead in what was regarded as the most violent episode in our history since 16 Police Field Force personnel died in a single engagement

with communist terrorists near the Malaysia-Thai border in 1976.

A stunned nation received the news of the Memali incident with the apprehension that comes from sudden awareness that barbarous currents were underfoot in the country of which a beguiled public were only dimly aware and a political leadership in denial were loath to tackle.

That feeling was fortified by the recall of the violent attack with swords and other crude weapons on a police station in Batu Pahat in 1980 by members of a religious cult.

Also uneasily recalled were the series of attacks on Hindu temples in 1978 perpetrated by young Islamic zealots on a deity-destroying campaign that culminated in several deaths when the marauders were interdicted by vigilantes on guard at a temple in Kerling, near Kalumpang on the Selangor-Perak border.

At the time of the Memali incident, the public were given to understand that Mahathir was in China.

When he returned, he fielded questions at the customary press conference at Subang airport where he was asked on the Memali incident.

Generally, in remarks to an expectant press, Mahathir defended Home Minister Musa's decision to allow police to interdict the hamlet in Mukim Siong where Ibrahim Libya and his followers were holed up.

Days later when PAS proclaimed the deaths of Ibrahim and his followers as "mati syahid" (martyrs), Mahathir rubbished the pronouncement in the teeth of word, unreported in the mainstream media of course, that Malay villagers in Kedah and Kelantan were streaming to the Ibrahim's burial site to pay their respects.

'Musa ordered assault'

Mahathir's support of Musa's judgement call on Memali would take a perverse turn 18 months later, in the intense final week of the campaign for posts in the Umno elections of April 1987, when the then chief secretary to the government issued a statement that it was indeed Musa who gave police the order to open fire in the Memali incident.

Musa scrambled to contain the damage from that obviously politically motivated disclosure.

Musa would go on to lose his Umno deputy president's post by 45 votes to challenger Ghafar Baba while Musa's teammate in the campaign, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, would be 43 votes adrift of incumbent Mahathir's tally for the president's post.

Thus ended a momentous chapter in the history of Umno and the Malaysian nation but the argument between two of that contest's principals, Mahathir and Musa, is set to continue, given Musa's claims about Mahathir being in the country during the Memali incident when it was supposed he was abroad.

Long time observers well know that there is a big difference between appearance and reality in Malaysian politics.

In the wake of the disappearance of flight MH370, now three weeks in a vanishing act into the ether, they may come to realise that in the surreal world of Malaysian politics, reality is more fantastic than the imagination.

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