

## **A 30-year-old love letter to Chandra Muzaffar**

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**October 27 marked the 30th anniversary of Operasi Lalang, which saw 106 people detained without trial and three newspapers' publishing licence revoked. The episode is a grim reminder of what can happen in the absence of check and balance, and which has left a deep scar in the Malaysian psyche. To mark the day, The Malaysian Insight speaks to those involved in the dragnet – the victims and their families, detention centre wardens and police.**

DR Chandra Muzaffar has carried a handwritten letter in his wallet for the past 30 years.

Imagine that. Prime ministers have come and gone, laws have been repealed, and Malaysia is unrecognisable from 1987, but that letter has been preserved like treasure.

It is from his daughter, then eight years old. She was writing to give him hope and love while he was detained under the Internal Security Act. He has kept the letter all this while to remind him of the loving support he received from his family during the 52-day ordeal.

He proudly shows it to The Malaysian Insight. Yellowed and torn at the sides, it reads:

"Dearest Abah, I miss you. I hope you will come back early. I didn't go to school for 4 days. Every time I pray for your safety.

"We went on Wednesday but they won't let us in. We gave you same things. I hope you got the things.

"Abah dont worry, you will be safe. I cant go and meat you. but soon I will go and meat you. I cannot go there becoes on the way back mama will go thear. thear wil not do anything you. dont worry. Good bye Abah i love you."



Chandra was the founder of Aliran Kesedaran Negara (Aliran), a multi-ethnic reform group in Malaysia for justice, freedom and solidarity.

He was picked up at home in Bayan Baru, Penang, on October 27, 1987. His wife and two daughter were with him.

He said he had anticipated the government crackdown a month before it took place and had warned his Aliran colleagues to be prepared.

Now the chairman of Yayasan 1Malaysia, Chandra said he had forgiven those responsible for his detention and moved on.

Below are excerpts of the interview:

**TMI: Why were you detained?**

Chandra: I think in some aspects, Aliran was perhaps the most vocal of the emerging middle-class urban intelligentsia that was increasingly vocal about several issues. Aliran was emblematic of the growing dissent.

I think Operasi Lalang was an attempt to curb dissenting voices. This was reflected in their line of questioning during interrogation.

**TMI: What did they ask you?**

Chandra: They were basically not happy with dissent. They tried to implicate me in opposition politics. It didn't work.

I was interviewed twice by the then Inspector-General of Police Hanif Omar and the Special Branch chief Abdul Rahim Noor.

Based on the questions asked, I think there was a lack of appreciation for the role of dissent in democracy. In a democracy, you really should have no need to justify peaceful dissent.

That was Aliran's work. We organised forums, seminars, conferences and wrote articles.

They were worried even though we did not have the support of the masses or the political parties. It was nothing like Bersih today.

**TMI: Did they ask you questions not related to dissent?**

Chandra: They asked me why I did not appreciate what the government did. This shouldn't have been an issue as in all my statements, I would acknowledge the good and positive things that the government did. We welcome what is good and critique what is bad. That's democracy.

But I saw that they were uneasy with dissent. Security and stability issues were used as camouflage, to perpetuate the position of the power holders at that time. That was clear to me.

I can say now that during my detention, they wanted me to see (then prime minister) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad). Hanif wanted to arrange the meeting.

I suspect Dr Mahathir was unhappy with the dissenting voices and my role in Aliran. I have reason to believe that was the reason Hanif wanted to arrange the meeting. But I turned it down.

I told Hanif it was not right for me to meet Dr Mahathir because he was a free citizen and I was under detention. I was not in a situation to make decisions. Hanif accepted my stand.

**TMI: Were you mistreated?**

Chandra: For 10 days there was no communication with the outside world except with the interrogators. After that they allowed family visits. That in itself was abuse, the solitary confinement.

To be fair to the police, there was no attempt at physical or verbal abuse. I was released on December 18, 1987.

I had three affidavits submitted on my behalf, asking for my release, from Dr Tan Chee Khoo, and (former prime ministers) Hussein Onn and Tunku Abdul Rahman. The three

individuals succeeded in making a point.

I think that was also one of the reasons the IGP interrogated me. I was brought down from Penang to Kuala Lumpur (for questioning).

The police also tried to (insinuate that) I had Marxist leanings. I told them I was critical of Marxism and liberalism, even though there were good ideas in both ideologies.

**TMI: The police picked you up from your house?**

Chandra: My wife, my two daughters and I, we were coming back from town in the car. There was a car that was following us. They must have followed us for quite a while. I was staying in Bayan Baru.

We entered the house. They said, 'you are under arrest under ISA.' I asked them for the warrant, which they had. They were very sheepish.

They took a number of books from my library. My wife got ready a few things to put into a bag, toiletries and prayer mat and stuff like that.

I told them it was Maghrib already and they allowed me to do my prayers before they took me away.

**TMI: You mentioned Operasi Lalang was a setback to democracy and peaceful dissent. Have we recovered from it?**

Chandra: The best barometer is the media. The media was undoubtedly targeted. It was tamed by that operation. There have been amendments to the Printing Presses and Publications Act. Has the media become bolder, braver? I don't think so.

The amendments mean they don't have to renew their license annually. But most newspapers, partly due to media ownership and editors (being) very cautious, still toe the line.

You have a situation like 1MDB (1Malaysia Development Bhd), but the newspapers are presenting it as a fight between two individuals (Dr Mahathir versus Najib Razak) when

it is not. It is about something far more important – integrity, and they transformed it into a personality issue.

From that point of view, I don't think we have recovered.

(As for) civil society, they became quiet after the crackdown, but I think they have made a comeback.

**TMI: Dr Kua Kia Soong is asking Dr Mahathir to apologise, but Hanif Omar and Rahim Noor say Dr Mahathir is not responsible for Operasi Lalang. Do you think he should apologise?**

Chandra: It does not serve any purpose. I have suggested that Dr Mahathir be introspective and look at himself and his career – the good and bad things he has done.

**TMI: You say Dr Mahathir doesn't have to apologise. Does that mean you have forgiven him?**

Chandra: There is no bitterness. I have interacted with him quite a bit.

There are some people who still want to carry the wounds, but I don't think that's the way. – October 28, 2017.

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