

**Zaid Ibrahim- The relevant Malay
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“I don't pretend to be a man of the people. But I do try to be a man for the people.”

– Senator Gaius Gracchus in ‘Gladiator’

COMMENT | (Full disclosure, I compiled and edited Zaid Ibrahim's latest collection of essays, 'Zaidgeist: Building Bridges for a Greater Malaysia'. Of great assistance in this endeavour was ZI Publications, which in case you were not aware has many interesting titles in their portfolio).

Former law minister Zaid Ibrahim defines who an irrelevant Malay is [here](#) - “They are those who talk a lot about the ‘right way’ and the ‘correct way’, and they want us to think that they belong to that category of ‘right and correct’ people. They use public spaces under their command (because of their positions in the government) and they usually make pronouncements that attract headlines in news media and amongst Facebook users. They think that because they are able to issue sensational statements, they must be making some kind of impact on society and the country. They probably think they grow in importance as a result.”

A young Malay activist once said to me, if all Malay opposition politicians were like Zaid, the opposition would not be able to take on Umno but at least we would have Malay politicians who you could believe would lead Malaysia to a brighter future. Malay politicians like Zaid face that dilemma.

Whenever some Umno hack claims that Zaid is out of touch with the Malay community - which I suppose means those from the rural heartlands - I have to ask, what does out of touch mean, exactly?

That he warns them that a dogmatic approach to religion cannot withstand the vicissitudes of the modern world? That institutional integrity protects them from the powers of the state? That entitlement programmes have not benefited them if they have to rely on them forever? That Malay right is a sham that protects the political elites but not the average Malay citizen bereft of political influence and money? That race-based policy which favour one race is morally suspect? That modernity means more than just aping Western culture or that tradition means more than just aping Arab culture?

Does all of this make Zaid out of touch with the pure simple people that Umno claims they want to “uplift”? If it does, what does this say about the state of the education system and the policies of Umno?

Going by Zaid's definition of an irrelevant Malay, most Umno potentates would fall into this category. If this holds true, this would mean that Umno was composed of irrelevant Malays, which is kind of funny when you think of it because this would mean that people have been voting for a hegemon which is irrelevant.

But there is more to it than that. If you read the book 'Zaidgeist', Zaid's main concern is that the country and the political elites are slipping into irrelevancy and when this happens, the country will turn into one of those despotic theocracies that we read about and are thankful that we do not belong to.

His criticisms of the Malay community are not that of a self-loathing rebel but rather of someone who clearly sees that the direction the community is heading - led by kleptocratic charlatans - will destroy this country which is blessed with natural resources and a diverse polity which is an advantage globally, if only we could get our act together.

While I was compiling Zaid's articles what I noticed was a Malay politician who was interested in discussing the "real stuff". He was interested in starting a dialogue about what his community faced but more importantly, what the issues facing Malaysians were. Zaid had a very clear idea on the theme of this book and he wanted the articles compiled to reflect the serious questions that continuing support of this regime raises. He also wanted to be sure to offer an optimistic perspective of Malaysia even though it came in the form of criticisms.

The quixotic politician

Here is a point that Zaid made clearly and unambiguously (recently) when a blogger questioned the gender of cosmetics entrepreneur Nur Sajat and the religious authorities decided to get involved in this issue of grave importance -

"I have no idea what the process entails. Nur Sajat is a celebrity entrepreneur and Jakim thinks it's somehow its business to verify and identify the gender and sexual orientation of Muslims, including her. It must be stressful for Nur Sajat but I hope she will be strong. No one can change her identity. To her, I say: 'You are who you are. Live your life as only you know best.'"

Nur Sajat (*photo*), meanwhile, **said this** - "She said there were many other issues that were worthy of discussion, listing as examples matters regarding Malaysia's currency and how to generate money in the current economic climate. She added that her own story was 'boring' and that all anyone needed to know is that 'Nur Sajat is cun' - using the Malay word that runs the gamut from 'cute' to 'attractive'."

This is the type of clear statements from a politician you will get in this book. Unlike some Malay opposition leaders when it comes to race and religion, who waffle and fudge in the hopes of smoothening over the issue, Zaid makes his stand clear and unwavering. This is the optimistic aspect of 'Zaidgeist'. You may disagree with what he has said in the past or present, but Zaid has always been clear on what is on his mind.

Zaid has always been a quixotic politician, which is strange because he was, until he left Umno, a political insider. An Umno operative told me that Zaid was a loose cannon whose principles more often than not would hurt the opposition than Umno. Indeed, while the Umno state has been busy using the legal system and their propaganda arms to target Zaid, the opposition has often had to scramble to minimise the damage when Zaid (*photo*) decides to speak truth to power, when he should be keeping quiet and carrying the opposition tune, which merely means playing the game.

Many people, for instance, cannot get over the fact that the opposition needs Dr Mahathir Mohamad to save Malaysia. Zaid was one of the maverick's earliest supporters and was instrumental in getting the opposition comfortable with the idea of working with the man the opposition called a tyrant.

Now some would argue that this is a bad idea and indeed the narrative by the Umno establishment has been to use the former prime minister's past, the rhetoric of the opposition and the so-called ineptitude of the opposition to rally around Mahathir to their advantage but Zaid makes clear in various articles, that this is about the future and once a two-party system is established, we can as Malaysians fine-tune the system through the electoral process.

If you are an opposition supporter and wondered why Zaid says the things he says, you should really read this book. Everything he said, whether it is politically incorrect for the opposition or a poke in the eye for the Umno establishment, he has put down in words, long before he actually said them. Which merely means these are not political gaffes but rather ideas that he believes in and he believes would save Malaysia.

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