

## MY SAY: May 13 a lurking cancer cell

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On the 13th of this month, I was on my way to the new Bangkok airport after having participated in a UNESCO retreat in the outskirts of the city. The people who were with me had a travel advisory to go straight home after office. It did not sound like a very comfortable message but the ride to the airport was smooth and peaceful.

Still, an outsider would have found such travel advisories and media coverage unsettling although the situation in the city was not what it seemed. I personally had a hard time convincing others that it was only a section of the city that was under siege. By and large, it was business as usual in Bangkok.

Things only turned ugly when a retired army general was shot in the head. The scene was set for worse events in the following days. Many lives were lost and many injured. Property was destroyed and tensions rose.

This brought to mind a blot on our history some 41 years ago. Many, especially the guilty ones, would want to push what happened then to the deep recesses of their minds. Guilt has a way of haunting us until we own up and pay the price. This is what justice is all about. Easier said than done and often, when all is said, still very little gets done.

Then a teenager, I was a mere victim. And victims find it hard to forget the excesses that led to the event. This is why victims of the Holocaust do not want the world to forget, as do those of Sabra and Shatila, Rwanda, Srebrenica and so many others. Moreover, why should such things be forgotten if we failed to learn from them just because they have been sanitised in our minds?

Simply put, what the standoff in Bangkok reveals is that it is a "revolt" of the rural poor, no matter what the colour of their shirts. Some personalities may have catalysed or even cleverly exploited the situation, but it does not detract from the reality that the poor still exist and want their grievances to be heard and problems addressed. We cannot whitewash them, no matter how much we want to do so. Or water-spray them or spray them with plastic, even live bullets. Not surprisingly, the danger zone is said to be spreading in Bangkok, since the poor invariably have little to lose.

This is where some of the findings of the recently announced New Economic Model (NEM) are particularly worrying — 40% of Malaysian households are earning less than RM1,500 a month and 80%, less than RM3,000. These people may not be poor relatively, but they are "victims" of the system, whether we like it or not. The fact that only 20% of Malaysians seem to benefit from the country's progress and development is indeed cause for concern.

Add to this the fact that 80% of our labour force has only SPM qualifications or the equivalent. Their path upwards is not going to be easy, and what is worse, the national education system is not capable of providing much-needed opportunities because it is top heavy and university-biased, according to the findings of the NEM report.

Taken together, these are strong indicators of how things could slip up easily unless the problems are addressed carefully and consciously. If at one time companies with ties to our colonial masters were blamed for what went wrong, what about today? If a new economic policy was devised to save the situation then, what about now?

Clearly, the situation today is more complex. In neighbouring Thailand, everyone communicates fluently in a common lingua franca — the Thai language (not English). They practise the same cultural values and norms and celebrate the same festivities. Yet they are embroiled in what is dubbed "Thailand's worst political violence in decades, which has spiralled out of control and raised concerns of sustained, widespread chaos". Some even liken it to a potential civil war.

Somehow, scenes of bloody violence, towering columns of black smoke rising from the hot spots and ongoing deadly street clashes caused a rush of memories of a similar experience. For most, it is the May 13, 1969 incident and its attendant prejudices. It can only be made benign if we are willing to reflect on it and learn hard lessons from it. Until then, May 13 will remain a lurking cancer cell, ready to metastasise.

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