

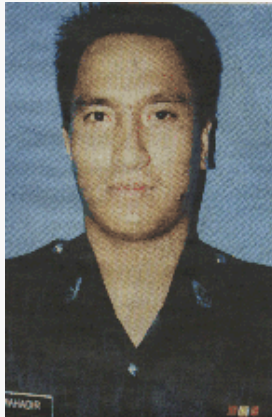
Defend our men in blue

Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

Article

New Sunday Times - 10/09/2006

WHEN constable Mahadir Tawile, 24, was shot dead on Sept 18 as a result of a "friendly fire" during a police operation against a notorious robbery gang in Mentakab, Pahang, it did not hit the front pages of most newspapers.



Mahadir lost his life while grappling with dangerous robbers in Mentakab, Pahang

Yet, it is very fresh in one's mind how just about any story about police is front page news not only by most newspapers but also hogs the headlines for weeks on end.

Recall the classical nude-squat or the bald heads controversies. How about some alleged brutality, corruption, or that petty crimes are on the rise.

As though that is not enough, the issues are "replayed" in Parliament, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes appearing like just for the thrill of it.

Still, the outcome resembles a systematic police bashing or, at the very least, a hype of sorts, though mostly it is more like flogging a dead horse.

Except for the new language of human rights and transparency, all in all, nothing "new" has been said.

It has been articulated before but the arguments were less "sexy" then. Thus, they did not capture the imagination of the media, less so the public and politicians.

That Malaysia today has a new-found freedom of expression also makes the issue juicier. Unlike before, when there was not too much room to criticise, suddenly the freedom has allowed for verbal bursts on issues that were once forbidden.

For example, if once upon a time, taking law enforcers to task was a risky business, this is not the case any more.

While it may be true that the "watchful eyes" of Big Brother are slowly being dismantled, the worry today is whether we know when, where and how to stop, without sacrificing decorum or adab on this new altar of freedom.

Or, are we taking the new free space to express ourselves for granted to the extent that we are not concerned about creating unwarranted anxiety, if not confusion, among the public and the police force?

As for the policemen, some are already getting more defensive, while many more are demoralised, as the public get even more hawkish.

To make matters worse, the police are supposed to absorb all the criticisms without too much of a chance to rebut, less so to hit back. It is worse when one side claims immunity, while the rest become free-for-all targets, sometimes unjustly.

Any attempt to level this playing field is met with veiled warnings in no uncertain terms, be it to the one

leaving the highest office in the civil service, or the one just about to warm his seat on the first day.

For lesser officers, the punishment can be swift. An immediate transfer or show-cause letter is something that is not too difficult to imagine.

Meanwhile, the "oral and print diarrhoea" continues to take on even broader and larger targets.

Some even take pot shots at the country's leaders, insisting that is their democratic right. The question, of course, is what sort of democracy do we want or desire.

To understand what the options are, just look around, including at the events unfolding north across the Malaysian border.

Or go further to some of the matured democracies of the world, where some are in the grip of their own set of problems.

Suddenly, draconian rules and laws are making grand entrances in these countries with relative ease. This is a signal to those who already have such rules that it is okay to have them a while longer.

Meanwhile, the "small" people who are paid to defend whatever little freedom remains do so with their lives.

Here is where we come back to the story of policeman Mahadir Tawile.

For someone who had put his life on the line, he was paid such a pathetic sum that he must be one of our many unsung heroes.

But where is the celebration, recognition or whatever?

Until the new Inspector-General of Police exposed that most policemen were living below the declared Kuala Lumpur poverty line, many would have thought that the police force owes us a living.

They are expected to protect each of us from anything, ranging from benign dog bites to fatal terrorist attacks.

Failure to do so will be met with sarcasm and unkind words, or castigation of all sorts!

Yet, all things considered, the police force has done a darn good job — only that we are most ungrateful with our ways.

So, does it come as a surprise to us that police in Britain, the United States and Japan are paid higher than the civil servants, as revealed recently by the longest-serving IGP of Malaysia?

Suddenly, it makes sense though it has taken a rather long time for us to come to our senses. It is indeed sad that this was not considered much earlier.

While one of the ex-IGPs said that a salary hike had been advocated for a long time, it is even sadder knowing that this matter was not followed up diligently as the last salary revision for the police was at least a decade ago.

It is as though no one cares despite the country having undergone many revisions in almost all areas, each time bringing new pressures on the issues of security and public protection.

Although, reportedly, the recent IGP's proposal to revise the police salary will not be taken up just yet, it continues to receive strong sympathy and support for changes in the way we have been treating those who have looked after the country and its citizens all this while.

Apparently, this is one proposal that "can expect full support from MPs regardless of party", to quote one long-serving politician.

To this a Suhakam Commissioner contended "they (the police) have long been neglected compared to other civil servants".

At last, instead of being lectured on how to respect the human rights of others, the human rights of the police are also being considered, hopefully beyond just the issue of salaries.

Only in that way will many more Malaysians look up to the police and want to join the noble force.

While many parties are arguing for their pay revision, priority must be accorded to the country's front-liners on matters related to security, as well as law and order. This must include the military, the Customs and the immigration officers.

Let us not take for granted any more their good work; rather, they must be given the compassion that has long being overdue.

To Mahadir and all those who have lain their lives in the service of the public, you have done us all proud.

May all of you rest in peace. We hope your demise was not in vain, God willing. WHEN constable Mahadir Tawile, 24, was shot dead on Sept 18 as a result of a "friendly fire" during a police operation against a notorious robbery gang in Mentakab, Pahang, it did not hit the front pages of most newspapers.

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