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Columns
Brendan Pereira on Monday: Expect attacks to continue
07 Aug 2006
ANY journalist wanting to express an opinion on politics in Malaysia today is like a man trying to change a light bulb.
He is trying to shed some light, but knows that he may well be on the receiving end of a painful shock. Take the case of P. Gunasegaram, the group executive editor of The Edge.
His thought-provoking article titled "The myth of Mahathir's invincibility" unleashed a gush of bile. He was attacked mercilessly on websites and blogs, with one coward saying "somebody, please shoot this Gunasegaram for good".
Sadly, many of his critics were not interested in debating the substance of his commentary. Fewer still wanted to visit the core of his thesis — whether Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad can get back the power when someone else holds it and is not about to give it up.
Gunasegaram tracked the former prime minister's political career, noting that on a number of occasions over the years he was challenged. But each time, the power of incumbency kept him in power.
The writer argued that based on Malaysian political history, there was a danger of overestimating the former prime minister's power over the power of incumbency, which Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi enjoys.
Instead of tearing his argument to shreds, his critics took the easy way out — they mocked the colour of his skin, questioned his fitness to comment on a former leader, etc. By doing so, they were hoping to pummel him into submission, force him into thinking twice before attempting another piece on Dr Mahathir. Why?
Because many Malaysians are intolerant. Don't buy all that talk about freedom of speech. We either pull up the shutters or unsheathe the knife when someone offers a differing opinion. Perhaps even more disturbing is the ease at which some people — even those who have professed to embrace all Malaysians — reach for the race card to explain their disdain for an article or writer. The trend of attacking the messenger and avoiding a debate on the message is not going to change. It is not in the interest of some parties to have clarity in the system.
It is also not in their interest to have writers and journalists dissecting their statements and actions.
So expect the personal attacks to continue. In fact, expect it to get more personal, nasty and intense. Everything will be fair game — race, religion, national allegiance. Half-truths will be stirred together with lies and served up as facts.
That is the only weapon in the arsenal of those who want to neutralise writers or journalists who are not on the same page with them.
The perfect riposte from Gunasegaram and his ilk would be to keep on writing. Heaven knows, there is so much more to tell Malaysians about the country they live in, about the leaders they support and just what is Dr Mahathir's end game.

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