

Malay Party Conflict in the Eyes of an Author: An Analysis of *Busa Kalbu*

Che Abdullah Che Ya

School of Malay Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the conflict described by Arena Wati in his novel *Busa Kalbu* (2002). This novel shows the conflict that occurs in a Malay political party dealing with the upcoming General Assembly. The General Assembly includes the selection of top leaders with the conflict taking various forms related to power struggle, such as hostility, drop-passing and corruption and money politics. The study found the general conference to which the author refers to is actually the General Assembly. It ends with the UMNO Conference. The paper blends with the author's creativity to turn it into creative reality.

Keywords: Conflict, conventions, election, leaders, Malay party, politics, power, rivalry

INTRODUCTION

Literary works are born of experience and knowledge of an author and which blends with the author's imagination, creativity and vision (Baha, 2002). What happens in the environment provides a fodder to the author to produce a work of literature. The many turbulences experienced by the community is depicted by authors through their works. The Conference of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) is one of the main annual events in Malaysia. This conference receives wide media coverage both in Malaysia and overseas as it is a conference of the Malay party, UMNO, which leads the BN government in Malaysia. The power struggles featured in this Conference are a source of many conflicts taking the

form of character-assassination campaign, backstabbing, corruption, money politics and others. The power struggle occurring in UMNO is discussed by Arena Wati in his *Busa Kalbu*. This book was published by the National University of Malaysia in 2002.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 23 November 2015

Accepted: 15 March 2016

E-mail address:

cheabd@ukm.edu.my (Che Abdullah Che Ya)

This novel focuses on the annual UMNO General Assembly held in Kuala Lumpur which coincides with party elections. This results in a split in the party because of the competition for top posts. Party followers split into two groups; the first group defends its party position while the second group tries to take over the reins of power. In order to achieve victory, the groups resort to money politics which also results in widespread hostilities that lead to unprecedented violence (including murder), vote fraud or vote rigging and poison pen letters among others.

Faced with such a situation, Syed Zahid Omar and two political veterans work hard to ensure victory in favour of the group that they support which has held power for some time. The various ways they did to ensure their group's victory is through vote buying and cheating in the selection process by creating bogus votes. Finally, their group emerged victorious albeit with a small margin.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

An author has a close relationship with the community because he or she is a part of the community. What happens in the community provides a fodder and material for the author to produce a work of fiction via creative reality. Authors observe and analyse current political situations in the country; and blends them with his or her creative imagination and an ideology to produce a work of art. This study examines the view of Arena Wati, a well-known author and critique of the Malaysian political

situation, in his novel titled *Busa Kalbu* which examines at the power struggle and ensuing hostilities that occur in UMNO, a Malay-based political party in Malaysia.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- (i) To see how the turbulence that occurs in a Malay political party is captured in a novel and blended with creative reality.
- (ii) To examine the views of a Malay author on the political situation in Malaysia.
- (iii) To look at the role of literature as a socio-political recorder of history in a country.
- (iv) To educate the community about the harmful effects of the negative attitude of the political leaders.

OPERATIONAL CONCEPT

This paper uses the operational concept of literature review. It discusses many irregularities committed by politicians. Issues such as fraud in elections, the division between party members, money politics and others are described by the author. Authors usually display a bad image of politicians who may look like perfect politicians physically but suffer from a damaged faith. This article approaches the theme of the novel from the perspective of conflict.

Conflict means contradiction between individuals or specific groups. Dissent or disagreement includes resistance to powerful individuals or groups. According to Ting (1985, p. 67), conflict is a direct and conscious antagonism between individuals or groups to achieve common goals. In

order to achieve the common goal, the opposing team must be defeated first. In a conflict situation, due to rising enmity, often beating the opponent is more important than the achievement of goals. Conflict theories emphasise conflict as a key element in social life. It is considered normal and which cannot be avoided. Tjosvold (1993) said that “conflicts exist due to humans having different desires. This situation will bring the occurrence of conflict with each other.”

The conflict should be resolved or balanced (Conn, 1971). This is necessary to ensure adverse or negative effects do not occur. The main role of a mediator is to ensure a fair deal for the community. To resolve this conflict, the mediator requires adequate power and must be legally qualified for the job to resolve the conflict. The need for power in resolving this conflict is asserted by Miller and Rowe, two political scientists whose research has focused on the relationship between political conflicts and consensus achieved in human societies. The key assumption in their approach that revolves around the fact that members of the community have different goals, and different goals lead to conflict is that the conflict needs to be controlled if society wants to continue to exist. Controlling and balancing conflicts between conflict and consensus require power (Syed, 1994, pp. 29-30).

This is what Arena Wati portrays in *Busa Kalbu*. Problems that recur in the country due to political conflicts are illustrated again and again through characters such as Omar Syed Zahid, Syed Mokhtar, Baim and

others. Among the themes tackled by Arena Wati in this novel are power struggles (vying and fighting for posts in the party), abuse of power, fraud in the voting process that in turn led to a number of conflicts with the opposition and animosity among party followers, jealousy, slander, money politics and poison pen letters. What is disturbing is the pretentious attitude of political leaders that on the outset look genuine especially from the point of appearance, but their hearts are described as being ‘full of dirt’. Arenawati describe leaders who paint an image of themselves as passionate fighters but in reality, are only interested in accumulating wealth for themselves and their families.

ANALYSIS

Busa Kalbu shows the contradiction between two rival groups in a Malay political organisation. Conflicts occur during the General Assembly held in Kuala Lumpur. The existing leadership is led by one group and scrambling for positions has caused a split in the party into Team A and Team B. Both sides resort to various tactics to achieve victory. The advent of these dissidents raises concern among veteran leaders because of self-interest. Their position would be affected if the power holders are defeated in the elections. Syed Omar as a veteran political leader feels the tension due to this resistance.

“We are riding a horse with a broken leg.” Laments Syed Omar painful.

"If the horse collapsed, we also fall! Salmah warned. "Danger!"

"What are your thoughts?" asked Syed Omar to his wife.

"Time just ten days away but there is still much to be done." Salmah depressed. "Supporting from the external sector, the trade sector and youth who are not satisfied so far, already integrated." (Arena, 2002, p. 23)

As the leader of the party since its establishment, this resistance is not appreciated by Syed Omar. The victory of the opponent would threaten the position of Syed Omar as a Malay Kedah party leader. Pressure is felt when the rebels receive substantial support from delegates. Groups supported by Syed Omar are expected to suffer heavy losses. Most of the delegates provide support to the opposing team (Team B):

"...They said, their leader, Tuan Habib will be severe. For the party presidency, Team A can only win twenty seven areas. Team B can win a hundred and twenty. For the Deputy President post, Team A may only get twenty-two. Team B one hundred twenty five areas." (Arena, 2002, p. 220)

Zahid feels the pressure when it is reported that the opposition groups have gained greater support from delegates. Nevertheless,

he still hopes delegates will vote not based on the area they are from:

"The forecast decision continues to penetrate well into the Zahid head. That means that Team B had achieved over two-thirds majority. However, Zahid is not easily convinced. If it is true that his opponent conquered the area, it does not mean that all members of the representative of the area already supported Team B..." (Arena, 2002, pp. 194-195)

This contradiction has created a number of actions such as money politics. Libellous words, slander and poison pen letter have resulted in the opponents being cast in a bad light. Team A uses money politics to win votes which distresses Team B. Zahid condemns the practice of money politics (Arena, 2002, p. 194). Many followers of the two groups descend in Kuala Lumpur and create trouble resulting in riots and fights. The situation becomes intractable when they start killing each other. It is difficult to accept and fight for veteran leaders like Zahid especially so since this situation is a recurring feature since the party's inception; it is very difficult for them to digest what is happening:

Any such news coming into the party headquarters, he considered it as nonsense because for Zahid, the behaviour of the Malays has not been and will not be as bad as it. Willing to kill each other simply

because of the bickering among the leaders. Zahid really understand that the situation that exists now is a decisive element for the Malays; continue to exist or disappear slowly. They need to be united if they want to continue to exist. The main elements of the destruction are split by infighting. (Arena, 2002, p. 193)

While Zahid initially does not believe in the reports received, he is finally forced to agree this is the case. Supporters of both sides all converge in Kuala Lumpur. There is widespread ambivalence and hostility between them, which almost cripples the city of Kuala Lumpur. Chaos erupts in Kuala Lumpur, opponents fight until they are exhausted, burn buildings and many innocent people flee for their lives. Human lives become worthless as murders take place. The police and army interventions finally lead to a declaration of an emergency in Kuala Lumpur.

“... The curfew will start at six. Soldiers have received orders to ‘shot to kill’. They help police to maintain the security. Kuala Lumpur residents scramble to return home. The villagers were fleeing. Outlets closed. Market becomes empty. Flea market disbanded. Massive arrests occurred.” (Arena, 2002, p. 212)

As the party in power, Team A has power over the media. It uses the online media to

attack its opponents. Events that occur are not reported in the mass media under the orders of superiors. Therefore, most people are not aware of the developments taking place:

... But they were disappointed because no such news. News of the bodies in Jalan Raja Bot, severed arm in Jalan Raja Alang, darted ear in Jalan Raja Muda, spilling blood in Jalan Chow Kit, and the dead bodies of unknown killer, did not attract the attention of the editor or prohibited from been published by the appointor of the editor. (Arena, 2002, p. 230)

To resolve the conflict, the author highlights the character Syed Omar, a political veteran who is liked by most party members. Despite being dishonest in judgment by favouring Team A, Syed Omar’s voice is heard by the delegates. As one of the longest serving leader of the party, his voice is heard by both warring parties. As Miller and Rowe say, “conflict and reconciliation requires power” (Syed, 1994, pp. 29-30).

To deal with this situation, Syed Omar proposes a number of recommendations to the organisers of the conference to provide a place and a healthy environment to reduce the likelihood of conflicts breaking out again among the delegates. The organiser is also reminded to take care of the welfare of the delegates and provide good food to them so that any dissatisfaction can be stemmed; since any unhappiness can lead to a groundswell of support among the

unhappy delegates and spark another round of violence. Syed Omar who represents the powerful group organises this effectively:

- *Luxury vision in the trial so that their eyes do not look bad, which can encourage the rise of resistance.*
- *Give them extra space and comfortable seating area to eliminate fretting that may stimulate criticism.*
- *Make sure everyone gets enough food and beverages before going to the conference to prevent them from hunger that always leads to anger.*
- *Serve them with a smile and warm-hearted because the Malays, when won his heart with good service, will not forget the keris on the belt as a weapon. Keris will only be considered as complementary fashion in the ceremony. That's the attitude of the delegation. Suave and smile will eliminate their opposition. (Arena, 2002, p. 169)*

Alarmed by the situation that does not favour the group that he supports, Syed Omar also proposes that the team he supports commit fraud via fraudulent votes. With the formula $2k + 3m = 5U$ (two lost, three won the five profit) he feels the party could be saved though it will be a small victory. He believes defeating the leader of the small opposition group will not cause a split in the party. The winning formula (a ratio of 3 to 2) is

to satisfy all parties (5U). A small victory will create awareness among party leaders that the myriad weakness in their leadership has caused the people to raise up against them. Team B suffers narrow defeat which it accepts though it is dissatisfied that it did not win the hearts of the people. The formula proposed by Syed Omar is finally able to reduce the intensity of the "storm" that would have badly hit party leadership.

Nevertheless, Team B prepares to exact revenge. According to Simmel (1966, p. 13), "among the factors that prompted the emergence of conflict is hatred, jealousy, desire and need for something". Hate and jealousy did not work as the Team B desires revenge in silence. As a result, Syed Mokhtar is finally caught in the snares set up by Team B. He was arrested when the police found the weapons stashed away in his car. Syed Mokhtar becomes a victim of dirty play and subsequently imprisoned. He eventually dies in prison when the prison collapses as a result of an earthquake:

In the boot of the car, the Forest Police found three machetes, two baskets of rice packs, eight reams of A4 paper which is stencilled reciprocity – poison pen letter.

"You were lucky." An inspector approached them. "If the infantry in the intersection find this, you will be shot dead on the spot." He ordered the Sergeant there, "Capture. Seized evidence and cars. Contact headquarters, let them make the interrogation!"

Weapons, food, poison pen letters in an emergency like this. It was a terrorist crime under the guise of political privileges.” (Arena, 2002, p. 251)

Through this novel, Arena Wati criticises the Malays as being antagonistic. The opposition does not only come from outside the party but from within it; there are contradictions within the party machinery although ostensibly they are all from the same party. There is widespread disunity in the Malay community which leads to the formation of two rival groups in the same party; the split between them is ostensibly to achieve their respective ideals. Arena Wati also expresses concern over the disintegration of the Malay community because the others will take the opportunity to divide the Malay community. This is seen in Ah Hoe’s action to distribute poison pen letters to divide the Malay community:

“I’m not crazy.” Ah Hoe laugh. His hands stretched out the bowl to Salmah to be filled with alcohol ale. After gulping it out, he said, “Ask two people to Johor. Two people to Melaka. Two people to Pahang. Two to Kelantan. Two to Kedah. Two other to Perak, and two to Selangor. It was adequate. There are many smart people that can write the letter. Give them a lot of money. Told them what we want them to write. They will write the letter. Now you know how the

poison letter is spread?” (Arena, 2002, p. 226)

The poison pen letters cause conflict and the split between the two sides become more apparent. Both groups accuse each other of spreading the poison pen letter. Animosity will only result in the Malays becoming losers according to Arenawati: “Let the Malays kill each other and Kuala Lumpur in chaos! Let the Malay-owned hotel destroyed by fire...” (Arena, 2002, p. 225).

The Conflict Rivalry

The novel also features a power struggle due to internal conflicts and abuse of power. Power is a crucial political element to help shape the political process and achieve a peaceful and prosperous society. It is the responsibility of the authorities to foster justice, freedom and social responsibility. On the other hand, too much power brings negative elements for the ultimate goal of every individual or party involved in politics is to gain power. The authorities will attempt to defend the power they hold while others attempt to gain power. Having some sort of power will allow the leaders to achieve their goals with less distortion. This is the Arena Wati’s key message delivered in *Busa Kalbu*.

The Power Struggle (Position in the Party)

Busa Kalbu is a classic display of jostling for posts in a Malay party. Syed Omar and Datuk Zahid who are two political veterans

who strive to ensure they win the election at all cost so that their position is not threatened. The situation became tense when a group backed by some delegates challenge them. Syed Omar who is unable to accept the situation works hard to ensure that his team wins, despite his own poor health. For him, a defeat would be a great disaster as it would undermine his position and his political future:

“What if I lose?” The question was repeatedly appeared in his head. He honestly admits that this time the battle is intense. The opponent is stronger, though all electronic and print media have been used ...”
(Arena, 2002, p. 22)

To maintain power, politicians appear to be willing to do anything. They are not only willing to commit oppression and cruelty but also commit fraud in the voting process. Syed Omar clearly does not respect democracy. Decisions are made based on the formula $2k + 3m = 5U$. This means getting two wins and losing three. Quite simply, Syed Omar wants to ensure his team wins, but with a slight majority. Narrow defeat will not hurt the opponent and will not cause the winning side to be arrogant. According to the author:

“We must seek a narrow victory. And they lost narrowly. In that way those who hold power will awaken and the losing side is not disappointed. The more important

thing is that other countries will be more confident, our party as the backbone of the government implements democratic maturity.”
(Arena, 2002, p. 242)

The defeat of his group will certainly threaten his position as a leader of the party in Kedah. Thus, he continues to fight despite his declining health. He attends the general conference in a wheel chair. Syed Omar's strategy and persistence in defending his power is in line with the opinion of Thomas Hobbes that “the general tendency of man is greed for more power, power that will only end in death” (Ball, 1993, p. 5).

The Abuse of Power

Power offers an individual the latitude to act according to what he or she wants (Flechtheim, 1952). Those authorities also often force individuals or members of society to follow what they decide. Individual points and opinion are often dismissed by the powerful and therefore, those in power commit abuses. Maclver (1952, p. 87) says the authorities have “... the capacity to control the behaviour of others either directly by fiat or indirectly by the manipulation of available means...”. With a strong sense of belonging, Syed Omar manages to ensure his victory in the party. Seeing that his opponents have strong support, Syed Omar decides to take more dramatic steps by vote rigging and committing fraud. As a legitimate leader, he abuses his power through fraudulent votes.

He asks the Chief Clerk of the party, Baim, to place ballot boxes containing fraudulent votes in a special room before voting begins:

“Why must you hesitate? We’ve mastered the building control. Two special room key was already in the hands of Baim. We will take the special ballot box, save there for a few hours before the voting session. The box containing valid votes were stored there as well for more than three hours, and then taken back to calculate the amount. In that room, we will implement the formula of $2k + 3m = 5U$.” (Arena, 2002, p. 200)

The author also describes the attitude of corrupt leaders who ignore the plight of the Malay community. Arena Wati describes how the leaders receive bribes from the Chinese to open a pig-breeding farm in the Malay community. Bureaucracy that slows down the approval or application of a tender is a result of corruption. Though the power is in the hands of politicians they are free to make whatever decision as long as it benefits them. This is characterised by Syed Omar who possesses the power to accumulate wealth. All property owned by him was unlawful:

Syed Omar in doubt, how far Baim know he has a condominium complex in Bandar Baru Bangsar and Brickfields? Condominium and hotel complex in Penang? Some of the building blocks of shops and residences in Alor Setar? This was

done through correspondence with secretarial work behind the scenes to get the easy approval from the mayor and the managing director of a number of financial institutions. (Arena, 2002, p. 283)

As a chief clerk of the party, Baim knows all the irregularities committed by Syed Omar. Therefore, the news breaks out that the Chief Clerk of the party is giving in to the immense pressure by Syed Omar. However, it also frightens Syed Omar. He does worry all the irregularities and scandals will eventually make him lose power. Faced with such pressure, he faints in the plane.

CONCLUSION

Busa Kalbu is a product of Arena Wati’s disgust and disillusionment with the current UMNO leadership. In particular, he is concerned with the political upheavals taking place in the party which have led to many undesirable outcomes. The novel is an angry vent by the author related to the ugliness of what is happening at the political scene but it is beautifully written. Behaviours of political leaders who physically project an image of calm, faith and religiosity mask their actual self-serving agenda. They are not concerned with the well-being of the people. The novel describes ugly behaviours of politicians in gaining and retaining power.

Busa Kalbu talks about the political turmoil in UMNO characterised by rival groups and their hostility, money politics, the presence of favouritism (cronies) and the existence of a small number of mutually

exclusive groups, abuse of power among others which the author present in the form of creative reality. Although not mentioned directly, the Malay party alluded to is UMNO and clearly the novel is for UMNO audience. As the largest Malay party and which is heading the government, the novel is clear reflection of the ills affecting UMNO. The author explains that Dato' Onn founded this party and some characters used by him play a crucial role within the party. The author also points out that the main character and Zahid Syed Omar are followers of the party founded by Dato' Onn.

The appearance and character of Dato' Onn Hussein clearly shows the mess taking place in UMNO party. The year 1946 selected by the author also shows he is referring to UMNO since it was established in that year. The General Session also refers to UMNO General Assembly held each year. The importance of a general conference in this novel remind us of the UMNO General Assembly in 1987 when Tengku Razaleigh stood against Tun Dr. Mahathir Muhammad for the post of president. Contest for the Presidency was the most intense in the history of UMNO. Tengku Razaleigh managed to get support from other UMNO's leaders. Even though the final result was not in favour of Tengku Razaleigh, he managed to win 49% of the vote. The election crisis eventually led to a split in UMNO when UMNO sacked Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah which led him to founding Parti Semangat 46.

Indeed, *Busa Kalbu* is a socio-political account of UMNO which is important

for future generations. The author deals with issues related to hostility between members of the party, the practice of money politics, their cronies and others from an environmental reality and presents them in the form of creative reality. Events discussed in the novel will serve as a guide and lesson for readers, particularly young audiences.

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