

Malaysia: Freedom -- the human imperative

by Dr Munawar A. Anees

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"Freedom has no history." This seminal statement by a teacher of enlightenment, Andrew Cohen, left me stunned when I first read it. It gripped my heart with a sense of profoundness. In these four words freedom stood as the essence of human existence. These words awoke me to the reality that freedom is timeless: You cannot hold human freedom within the confines of time and space. You can talk of freedom neither in the past nor in the future context. Freedom was, is, and will be, eternal.

That is why freedom has no history. But, looking deeper, I come to understand that freedom does have a story. And nobody tells that story better than J. Krishnamurti: "What man has done to man has no limit. He has tortured him, he has burned him, he has killed him, he has exploited him in every possible way-religious, political, economic. This has been the story of man to man." Thus, the denial of freedom has a history, a bloodied history.

When Malaysia's autocratic former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed sent his police in September 1998 to kidnap me from my home in front of my wife, I was totally unaware of the consequences of loss of one's freedom. For the next 126 days, I remained in the hands of my cruel captors who inflicted every pain upon me that Krishnamurti talked about save death.

For the first time in my life, I realized what it meant to be a "prisoner of conscience". The internment, when motivated by ulterior ends, brings a brutal deprivation upon the victim. It acts like a double-edged sword. One's freedom of movement is taken away by one's tormentors, while one's conscience suffocates in a dungeon. A poignant grief sets in once there is a cognizance that both the body and the conscience have fallen victim to the act of tyranny.

That is what distinguishes incarceration resulting out of a crime from that emanating from the crimes of those who persecute innocent others. My kidnapping and detention by the infamous Malaysian Special Branch taught me how it feels to be forcibly separated from one's wife and children.

How it feels to be searched and seized, disallowed to make phone calls, handcuffed, blindfolded, stripped naked, driven in an animal cage, shaven bald, endlessly interrogated, humiliated, drugged, deprived of sleep, physically abused. What it's like to be threatened, blackmailed, tormented by police lawyers, brutalized to make a totally false confession, hospitalized for a consequent heart ailment, and treated as a psychiatric patient with symptoms of Stockholm syndrome.

Barely surviving on a meagre diet of rancid rice and chicken along with 12 medicines a day, I spent nearly four months handcuffed around the clock to my hospital bed, under the watchful eyes of the prison guards. Slowly but painfully, the wounds of physical torture may heal. In time, the psychological anguish may subside. But the freedom that is lost is never regained.

The time of one's life spent in trammels turns into a coffin of one's conscience. One physically lives on, but only with the burden of a mutilated and muted conscience. That, to me, is the ultimate human agony. This leads me to think of freedom as a value and not as an instrument for freedom is not a commodity that can be traded at will. It can neither be granted nor taken away by a decree for it is an innate human trait.

Freedom, meshed into human conscience, is not a physical entity for which a replacement has a redemptive value. Therefore, restitution of freedom remains a stark reminder of the diabolic act played at strangulating the human conscience.

The loss of freedom is more than a physical loss. It is the extinction of the light of conscience. The incarceration of innocents for nefarious political ends is a crime that strikes at the root of human dignity. And freedom without dignity is worthless. Freedom is the engine of human evolution. It is the catalyst that drives human imagination. It is the inspiration behind human achievement. No human progress is thinkable without freedom.

In a world gravitating towards liberty and democracy, there is no room for political ideologues who fail to recognize and respect human freedom. The global marching of democratic spirit has taught us that freedom is an immutable condition for the sustenance of democracy. Only a free flowering of human conscience, dignity, and freedom can vouch for democracy and, ultimately, world peace.

Those who are free must make a pledge to remain free and work for the freedom of those who are not. The sordid story of freedom must be effaced because freedom has no history.

This article was written by an outside contributor and does not necessarily reflect Amnesty International policy.

Background:

Dr Munawar Anees is a microbiologist who was born in Pakistan. A married man with two children, he is a respected Muslim writer and intellectual who has founded several journals on Islamic studies. In 2002, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

From 1991 to 1998, he served as an advisor to the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim. He now works as a consultant for the John Templeton Foundation. He is an American citizen currently living in Paris with his wife and their two children.

On 14 September 1998, he was arrested under the Internal Security Act in Malaysia and subjected to severe physical and psychological pressure during incommunicado detention to confess to sexual acts with Anwar Ibrahim. On 19 September, he was convicted of "unnatural offences" under s377D of the Penal Code, after he pleaded guilty to having "allowed himself to be sodomized" by Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar's adopted brother Sukma Darmawan also pleaded guilty to the same offence, but later testified his "confession" had been forced.

Dr Anees served four months in prison before leaving Malaysia. He later appealed his conviction and sentence, stating that his "confession" had been coerced. He described his arrest and interrogation in a sworn statement that detailed aggressive, disorientating and prolonged interrogation, threats of indefinite detention and, degrading treatment including being stripped, and being ordered to mimic homosexual acts.

In September 2004, Malaysia's highest Court upheld the final appeal of Anwar Ibrahim and Sukma Darmawan against sodomy convictions imposed in 2000. The Court found that a key prosecution witness was unreliable and, expressing concern at reports of police brutality, found that Sukma Darmawan's "confession" had not been made voluntarily. The two prisoners of conscience were released.