

Keynote address at 1000-day anniversary of the enforced disappearance of Pastor Raymond Koh

The Pullman Hotel | Kuala Lumpur | 16th November 2019

1. Good evening and thank you for inviting me to say a few words as we gather to mark the 1000-day anniversary of the enforced disappearance of Pastor Raymond Koh.
2. I am not here this evening because I knew Pastor Raymond Koh, or any of the other victims of enforced disappearances like Amri Che Mat, Pastor Joshua Hilmy or his wife Ruth. I did not have that honour and privilege.
3. Truth be told, I am here because I'm angry.
4. I am angry that a decent and honourable man, a man who dedicated his whole life to helping others, was snatched from our streets and made to disappear. I am angry that our government has been implicated in this heinous crime, angry that officials who were sworn to uphold the law carried out so horrible a deed and then did everything in their power to hinder, obstruct and obfuscate the investigation.
5. I am here because, like you, I believe that silence and inaction are not options. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German clergyman who stood up to Hitler at the cost of his own life said, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

A STAGGERING CRIME

6. Much has happened since that fateful day in February 2017. Little did we realize when the first reports of Pastor Koh's disappearance started coming in that we were actually witnessing something sinister and evil unfolding.
7. The subsequent discovery of the video, showing in detail a well-planned and professionally executed abduction, decisively exposed the deception that was being put out at the time that it was simply a case of someone gone missing or, at worst, a gang-related kidnapping. Without that providentially provided video, together with corroborating testimony from first-hand witnesses, who knows where the case would be today?
8. We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to SUHAKAM and the lawyers and NGOs who took up these cases of enforced disappearances when no government agency seemed interested in finding out the truth. SUHAKAM's unanimous conclusions that "there is direct and circumstantial evidence which proves, on balance of

probabilities, that Raymond Koh was abducted by state agents, by Special Branch, Bukit Aman” sent shockwaves that reverberated far beyond our own shores.

9. SUHAKAM also concluded that Amri Che Mat, who was abducted a few months earlier, “was also a victim of enforced disappearance with circumstantial evidence pointing to Bukit Aman as the culprit.”
10. Taken together, it suggest that a disturbing scenario was unfolding – the state, and/or its agents, had opted for extrajudicial methods to deal with a particular set of people whom they considered a threat to the establishment. If not for SUHAKAM’s intervention and the attendant publicity it generated, the pattern of abductions and enforced disappearances might well have continued.
11. The integrity and passion for truth and justice of the commissioners under the leadership of Judge Mah Weng Kawi, together with many others who aided and assisted the investigation, stands in sharp contrast to the deceitfulness, dishonesty and irresponsibility of so many public officials who were involved in the case.
12. The SUHAKAM verdict has cast a long shadow over our police force. The integrity of the police, indeed of the government itself, is now in question. Until the government can prove otherwise in a credible and transparent manner, the SUHAKAM findings will stand as an appalling indictment against our police force and the government.

NOT THE MALAYSIA I KNOW

13. Like many of you, I’m still trying to understand how something like this can even happen in our country. I struggle to understand the perverted minds and twisted motives of officials who could act with such malice and brutality. And to see the machinery of government then engage in a vast conspiracy to cover up the abductions and enforced disappearances is something that I thought, perhaps naïvely, could never happen here.
14. One thing is sure, this is not the Malaysia I know, the Malaysia I was once proud to represent as diplomat and ambassador. And this is certainly not the Malaysia that Tengku Abdul Rahman, our founding father, envisaged when he declared on the first Merdeka Day some 62 years ago that “we will be forever a sovereign democratic and independent state founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of its people....”
15. In our relatively short history as an independent nation, we have seen many horrible things take place in this land we love and call our home. We have seen injustice,

intolerance and hate. We have seen the rights of the poor and marginalized trampled underfoot. We've even seen torture and death in our prisons. But this – the planned abduction and enforced disappearance of citizens by agents of the state – this is a new low which we cannot and must not let stand, must not allow to go unpunished, must not allow to become the new normal.

IV. DISAPPOINTED BY HOPE

16. Of course, all these cases of enforced disappearances took place during a dark time in our history. Under the previous Barisan Nasional government, justice was subverted, the abuse of power sanctioned and corruption allowed to seep into every facet of our society. We had a government that had completely lost its moral compass and officials who acted with complete impunity.
17. It was a proud moment, therefore, when the people of Malaysia made history by voting out the corrupt BN government. I was there that May night last year in front of the gates of Istana Negara waiting for Dr Mahathir to be sworn in as prime minister. There was an almost magical atmosphere there that night. We were all full of hope and giddy with excitement that a new day had dawned. It was, as I wrote the next day in an article, a second chance for Malaysia.
18. Among the many expectations we had that May night was that our democracy would be reborn, that justice would once more rule, that finally there would be a full and fair accounting of the misdeeds of the past, including cases of enforced disappearances.
19. After all, Dr Mahathir himself, in his first speech to the United Nations General Assembly last year, proudly announced to the world that “Malaysians want a new Malaysia that upholds the principles of fairness, good governance, integrity and the rule of law.... The new Malaysia will firmly espouse the principles promoted by the UN in our international engagements. These include the principles of truth, human rights, the rule of law, justice, fairness, responsibility and accountability....”
20. Sadly, the government's actions have not lived up to its rhetoric. And I, for one, must now confess to being disappointed by hope, shocked that the government I voted for would act with the same insincerity, deceit and disingenuity on important human rights issues, including enforced disappearance, as the government it replaced.
21. Dr Mahathir himself set the tone for this indifference to injustice when he dismissed the SUHAKAM findings on enforced disappearances as mere “hearsay.” So much for his oft-repeated claim that his administration would be committed to the rule of law.

22. And even when the government finally bowed to public pressure to act on the SUHAKAM report, it set up what my friend Rama Ramanathan of CAGED – the Citizens Action Group on Enforced Disappearances – rightly called “a bogus task force,” with vague terms of reference and a membership that hardly inspires public confidence.
23. It’s hard not to conclude that the so-called task force is designed to obfuscate the truth and protect the government and those who were involved in the abduction and enforced disappearances. I very much doubt that we can expect anything of any significance from this so-called “Special Task Force” appointed by the Home Minister.
24. It is shocking as well that so many of the politicians who were once outspoken advocates for justice and human rights, who were so vocal while they were in opposition, now sit silently on the government benches. Where are their voices when it is most needed? Why do they look the other way and pretend not to notice that Pastor Koh is still missing 1000 days after he was abducted?
25. It is hypocrisy, I submit, for our leaders to go around the world demanding for justice for oppressed people like the Palestinians, the Rohingya and the Uighurs while turning a blind eye to injustice and human rights abuses here at home. Of course, we ought to champion the just cause of the Palestinian people, the Rohingya, the Uighurs and others. But I suggest that our voice would carry greater moral authority if we were as committed to the cause of justice at home as we are to justice abroad.

AN UGLY TRUTH

26. It has been 1000 days since Pastor Raymond Koh was abducted and forcibly disappeared. And we are still no nearer to knowing the identities of the criminals who abducted him, why they did what they did, and what became of Pastor Raymond Koh.
27. One issue that is not talked about much for obvious reasons is whether the religious establishment itself had any role in these cases of enforced disappearances. It is, after all, no secret that at least two of the four victims of enforced disappearances had run afoul of the religious establishment.
28. Pastor Raymond Koh, for example, had been harassed by the religious establishment who suspected him of clandestine evangelism while Amri Che Mat had come under the scrutiny of senior officials in the state religious establishment for allegedly promoting Shia teachings.

29. The obvious question that begs an answer then is whether there was any kind of conspiracy between the religious establishment and the police to resort to extrajudicial measures to deal with people they suspected of engaging in activities which they considered prejudicial to national security. Did they then act as judge, jury and executioner?
30. At the end of the day, we are left to ponder the disturbing thought that agents of the state, quite possibly acting with the tacit approval of the religious establishment, abducted and very likely murdered Raymond Koh, Amri Che Mat, Joshua Hilmy and Ruth Setapi; that this was no rogue operation but part of a sanctioned move by unknown officials against troublesome religious workers.
31. It might also explain the government's seeming reluctance to thoroughly investigate these cases of enforced disappearances – that the truth about what really happened to Raymond Koh and Amri Che Mat is so horrible, so morally repugnant, so politically explosive, that even this government now feels obliged to cover it up.
32. Whatever their reasons are, however, we cannot accept a cover up. We cannot afford to forget and move on. We owe it to the families of the disappeared as well as to future generations of Malaysians to keep insisting that there be a full and fair accounting of what happened, what became of those who were abducted, and who were responsible.
33. Already, our nation is caught up in a wave of religious extremism, even hysteria. Religious extremists and racists are increasingly promoting the narrative that Malaysia is only for Malays and calling for the exclusion of non-Muslims from government positions. A few days ago, one of them even went so far as to insist that non-Malays be denied the right to vote. It's a worldview that is being extensively and aggressively promoted across the country and it is shaping minds and hearts in profound ways.
34. Minority religious groups like Christians and Shia are being demonized, targeted and condemned as "kafir harbi," (belligerent infidels with whom the Muslim community is supposed to war against).
35. When even government agencies participate in closed-door seminars with university students that discuss the so-called Christian threat, when a state mufti callously dismisses the abduction and disappearance of Amri Che Mat with the insulting remark that maybe he has gone on a pleasure trip to Thailand, how long before someone somewhere takes it upon himself to act against these so-called "enemies" of race and religion?

36. It is precisely this kind of mindset that I suspect laid the groundwork and created the culture that led to the abduction and enforced disappearances of men like Pastor Raymond Koh and Amri Che Mat.

LONGING FOR A BETTER NATION

37. As I exchanged emails and text messages with Esther Koh in preparation for this event, one thing she said stood out: that this has now gone beyond the enforced disappearance of her dad; it has become an issue about how we Malaysians respond to all injustice and human rights abuses in our land.
38. And she is right. If we only meet to demand justice for Raymond Koh, we dishonour the legacy of the man and what he stood for as well as the courage of his family who continue their long and painful quest for justice. The same compassion that motivated Pastor Raymond to reach out to the poor and marginalized must now motivate us to fight for a better nation, a nation that will respect the rights of all irrespective of race or religion or gender, whether migrant or refugee, a nation that will be inclusive and respectful of the dignity of all its sons and daughters.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

39. In closing, I want to remind you of something that Tengku Abdul Rahman said at the end of his declaration of independence speech. He said, “I call upon you all to dedicate yourselves to the service of the new Malaya: to work and strive with hand and brain to create a new nation, inspired by the ideals of justice and liberty – a beacon of light in a disturbed and distracted world.”
40. I submit that Tengku’s call and the vision he laid before us some 62 years ago is even more important today than it was then. And it lays upon us all an obligation to dedicate ourselves to the unfinished task of building that nation inspired by the ideals of justice and liberty for all.
41. It is, I believe, the only way to honour Pastor Raymond Koh, Amri Che Mat and Joshua Hilmy and his wife, as well as ensure that they are never forgotten.
42. Thank you.

[Dennis Ignatius | Kuala Lumpur | 16th November 2019]