

**Kee Thuan Chye, *Ask for No Bullshit, Get Some More!* Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2013. 277 pp. ISBN 978-967-5832-72-7.**

On pronouncing the end of human search for Truth, the American philosopher, Richard Rorty, calls on us to invest our hopes in figures other than the philosopher. Our age is marked by the “death” of philosophy, and we have not only finally come to terms with the contingency of our existence, but we also celebrate it. Rorty argues that since Plato, there has been an obsession with finding a “single vision” of social reality (*Philosophy and Social Hope* 12), by which private articulations of truth, justice and other first principles are fused with public concerns relating to social and political relations (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* xiii). Ultimately, no single of these single visions has transpired. Rather, what we have seen through the ages is a series of conflict and suffering brought about by the private obsession of philosophers for their own self-realisation, represented in public spheres by the devotees of their competing claims to truth.

There is an urgent need for us to move away from the philosopher’s private obsession, which still dominates our contemporary society. But the task at hand is not to counter-pose another version of *the* Truth in the face of the fanatics. Rather, what needs to be done is, first and foremost, to mobilise our creative potentials to engage in a continuous process of *redescription*. This process involves an admission that we are all but products of “time and chance” (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 22), creatures of contingency, who at best will offer our fellow human beings not “algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas” (xv), but a more attractive vocabulary that would foster an ethos, a sense of solidarity amongst people across the lines of difference. Such is Rorty’s utopia, where human solidarity is the goal to be achieved, “not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers” (xvi). This job is *not* for philosophy and theory. It is for “genres such as ethnography, the journalists’ report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel” (xvi). We have to invest our hopes in writers of literature, novelists, poets, dramatists, playwrights and journalists. Ultimately, it is democracy that matters, rather than the first principles that supposedly regulate its practices.

One can argue that Kee Thuan Chye’s *Ask for No Bullshit, Get Some More!* (2013) contributes to the advancement of democracy in Malaysia, in the above spirit of Rorty. In 2012, the Malaysian author, journalist, actor, dramatist, playwright and poet captured the imagination of many in the country, and from all walks of life, through his *No More Bullshit, Please, We’re All Malaysians*. *Ask for No Bullshit, Get Some More* was published on the back of the success of the

previous book. The chapters in the book were originally published as articles in various news websites, magazines and journals such as *Free Malaysia Today*, *Malaysiakini*, *the Sun*, *Penang Monthly* and *Centre for Policy Initiatives*. It also contains an address that Kee delivered at the Swami Satyananda Memorial Lecture 2012, as well as interviews and reviews of *No More Bullshit, Please*. The articles are grouped into a number of themes, which range from those that touch directly on Malaysia's Barisan Nasional (BN) government's doings (or misdoings), the Bersih protests, scandals involving politicians and the authorities, the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition, race relations in Malaysia and others. The book also contains selected excerpts from Kee's plays, as well as two full short plays – and it is to them that I turn my attention first, before looking into the articles.

Kee admits in his preface, almost apologetically (or maybe not), that he is “not a hot-shot political commentator, or a well-connected one” (ix). His aim, Kee writes, is to explain what the issues mean in a plain language. This is actually the strength of Kee's writing, I would argue, in the spirit of Rorty. His professed disconnection from those in seats of power has actually allowed him to connect with those who matter more to democratic politics, the people. Kee is very much aware of this: “Through me, they find their voice” (x). Through him, people could access ways to *redescribe* their political grammar and vocabulary. He carves out spaces for thinking about alternative visions for Malaysian democracy, without trying to suffocate his readers with his own vision of the future. All he seeks, in solidarity with those who are convinced by his ideas, is to bring about a better Malaysia. But, in this spirit of solidarity, Kee mentions that “it is up to us, really, to decide how we can help make this come about” (x). Through his plays, he paints to his readers pictures of the dilemmas of everyday Malaysians in facing up to the structural straitjackets that exist in the society. His short play, *Ideals and Principles* tells of the plight of Moomtaz, a journalist, whose scoop about a scandal involving a powerful figure in Malaysia brings him into trouble with the authorities. Moomtaz's editor refuses to publish the story, fearing the repercussions that such a move would have on his newspaper, and Moomtaz's subsequent decision to bring the matter to the police only lands him into distress, as he is harassed by the police officer taking the report. We are asked to share the dilemma that comes with Moomtaz's promotion to head of the newspaper's political desk at the end of the play (despite his pursuit of the case), and this aptly captures the dialectics of the workings of Malaysian politics. Do we allow ourselves to be co-opted into this structure that is anchored by the political elites and the security apparatus? Do we resist? If so, how do we do so?

Or, are we co-opted regardless? *Crutches*, the other full play (which was originally published in the *Asiatic* journal in 2009), tells the story of Brian, an engineer, and Lee, the head of a construction company, who are meeting a

Datuk, from whom they got a contract to build a college (172). They are called in to negotiate the amount of the payment to be offered to the Datuk for his favour in getting the contract. Despite having agreed on an amount earlier, the Datuk asks for more, and Lee tries to haggle with him. Annoyed, the Datuk threatens to cancel the contract, to force Lee agree on new terms of payment. After stepping out of the Datuk's office in distress, Lee rushes in again, seemingly to attack the Datuk. We are not told of what happens inside the room, but Lee and the Datuk emerge bruised and in crutches after the event, denying that they had exchanged blows. Lee gets the project afterwards (181).

In his articles, Kee calls on readers to think deeply on the issues he addresses. He is straight-talking and to the point most of the time, but he also occasionally adopts a sarcastic and ironic tone. The surface must be scratched, so that we can be aware of all the "bullshits" that are being dished out to us. Why is the BN using a political slogan *Janji Ditepati* (Promises Fulfilled) as the theme for the country's 2012 *Merdeka* (Independence) Day celebrations? (21). Why should we be pleased to receive the BR1M payout of RM500, when it is our tax money that is being used? Is this a bribe to obtain our votes in the elections? Should we allow ourselves to be bribed? (44). What are the authorities doing to curb the gangster culture that is being practiced by the Malay supremacist group PERKASA? (120). Why has there been no enforcement on the group by the Malaysian police, despite their constant public provocations against citizens of the country? Why is Mahathir Mohamad allowed so much air time by the media, only to utter pronouncements that are unbecoming of a former Prime Minister? (124).

More importantly, Kee often alludes to the urgency for Malaysians to garner whatever resources they have at their disposal to affect democratic changes in the country. Use the ballot box wisely, he advises (x). Take the voices of the students seriously, and treat them as the nation's vital democratic capital (16). Hold your reservations towards the inexperience of the opposition, and reflect on the prospect of a two-coalition system in parliament (48). Move away from our fixation on race when thinking about our relationship with others, which we actually do even when we believe that we are practicing anti-racism (195). Ultimately, Kee allows us to envision, in imaginative ways, how the idea of Malaysia can be redefined and managed differently. His critical attitude highlights the flaws in an otherwise seemingly monolithic political structure – what James Tully calls an exercise to “characterise the conditions of possibility of the problematic form of governance” (Tully 16) – and allows his interventions to affect a transformation of the self-understanding of the everyday and often “voiceless” Malaysians, which could enable them to join forces to push for a framework within which they could govern themselves differently.

Kee would undoubtedly be expecting more bullshit, “hijinks” and “hanky-panky” (*Ask for No Bullshit, Get Some More!* 209) in Malaysia, now that the 13<sup>th</sup> General Elections are over and that the BN has retained power. “Bullshit and more bullshit” to quote one of the themes in his book (95). “Bullshit,” however, can come from the opposing side, too. While Kee has been very direct and forthcoming about his criticism of the problems that permeates the practices of governance in Malaysia, he is much softer when he speaks of the opposition and the civil society. Would he have taken a conciliatory stance if there was bickering amongst BN politicians, rather than PR’s, as he has done in the article “Why Hurt DAP by Fighting in Public” (Kee 158), for example?

### **Works Cited**

- Kee, Thuan Chye. *Ask for No Bullshit, Get Some More!* Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2013.
- . *No More Bullshit, Please, We’re All Malaysians*. Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.
- . *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, 1999.
- Tully, James. *Public Philosophy in a New Key (Volume I): Democracy and Civic Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.

**Khairil Ahmad**  
**International Islamic University Malaysia**