When bad journalism meets a dangerous overaction

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Promotional signs for Workers Party candidate George Galloway are pictured in Rochdale, northern England on March 1, 2024, the day after Galloway was elected as MP for Rochdale following a by-election. (Photo by Oli SCARFF / AFP)

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THE controversy surrounding journalist Rex Tan did not begin with sedition. It began with poor judgment.

At a public forum in Kuala Lumpur featuring George Galloway, Tan posed a question that attempted to equate Palestinian suffering under Israeli occupation with the condition of Chinese Malaysians. The comparison was historically careless and morally clumsy. It deserved rebuttal and professional scrutiny.

It did not deserve criminalisation.

Palestinians live under occupation. They face systematic dispossession, military violence, blockade, mass civilian death and apartheid like legal regimes. Nothing in Malaysia resembles that reality. Chinese Malaysians are citizens. They vote, hold office, practise their culture and religion freely, participate fully in economic and civic life, and live without the constant threat of military violence. Collapsing these radically different conditions into a single moral narrative was wrong.

George Galloway was right to reject the analogy. He did so calmly and decisively. He pointed out that there were no tanks, checkpoints, or segregated roads in Kuala Lumpur. He acknowledged that he was not an expert on Malaysia but made clear that the comparison did not stand. He corrected the argument and moved on. That is how flawed ideas are handled in a serious public exchange.

That should have been the end of the matter.

Instead, the response escalated, and the issue stopped being about journalistic error. It became about power.

There is a clear political logic to this escalation. Outrage simplifies. It converts disagreement into betrayal and shifts attention away from institutions toward individuals.

By focusing anger on a single journalist, public scrutiny is redirected from the proportionality of state action to the policing of acceptable speech. Outrage also rewards those who display it. Moral intensity replaces argument. Punishment becomes performance. This does not strengthen social cohesion or protect public order. It consolidates control.

A journalist asked a bad question. He was rebutted publicly. His argument failed in real time. Criticism followed. These are ordinary consequences in journalism. A bad question, even a profoundly bad one, is not a crime.

Detaining a journalist under the Sedition Act for an ill-conceived comparison does nothing to defend Palestine or protect national harmony. It signals something more troubling: an inability to distinguish between error and incitement, between embarrassment and threat. When those distinctions collapse, state power expands at the expense of principle.

As a Malay, I reject the claim that dignity requires coercion. A confident society does not need to punish speech it has already defeated.

What is more disturbing than the arrest itself is how quickly the backlash ceased to be about Rex Tan as an individual. Almost overnight, he was transformed into a racial symbol. Familiar phrases resurfaced. *Pendatang. Bersyukur. Jangan lupa diri. Balik Cina.*

These words are not neutral. They imply that citizenship may be legal but belonging remains conditional. They signal that speech is tolerated only within boundaries set by others, and that criticism becomes illegitimate once it unsettles dominant narratives.

This is where Malays, in particular, must be honest with ourselves. If Chinese Malaysians are full citizens, then gratitude cannot be demanded as a condition of legitimacy. Citizenship is not a favour. It is a constitutional reality. No citizen owes silence or deference in exchange for rights that already belong to them.

To insist otherwise is to recast equality as generosity and rights as gifts. That is not unity. It is hierarchy, thinly disguised.

Palestinian suffering should not be weaponised in this way. Palestinians are not asking the world to be grateful for survival. They are demanding justice, an end to occupation, displacement and apartheid. When their suffering is invoked to shame Malaysian citizens into silence, it is not honoured. It is used. In the process, the moral clarity of the Palestinian cause itself is diminished.

This misuse is especially ironic given the figure at the centre of the forum. George Galloway is not a nationalist in the exclusionary sense. He has been explicit for decades about his hostility toward nationalism as a political ideology. His politics are grounded in opposition to imperial domination and structural injustice. He rejected Tan's analogy not because it challenged Malaysia, but because it was analytically unsound. To invoke his presence as justification for racial moral policing is therefore misleading.

Some have argued that the episode is seditious because it risks reopening the wounds of May 13, 1969. As a Malay, I take that history seriously. May 13 was a national trauma born of political irresponsibility, racial mobilisation, inequality and institutional failure. Lives were lost. Trust was shattered. The consequences reshaped the country.

But history must be understood, not weaponised.

Invoking May 13 to justify criminalising a flawed question collapses intent, context, and impact into a single blunt category. Sedition implies incitement, an attempt to provoke hatred or violence. A poorly reasoned analogy, posed in a public forum, rebutted immediately, and criticised widely, does not meet that standard.

What is more dangerous is the selective application of sensitivity. If ethnic grievance itself is treated as inherently volatile, why is rhetoric that questions the legitimacy of citizenship tolerated so casually? History suggests that language which implies conditional belonging is far more combustible than clumsy political analogies.

May 13 should teach restraint and proportionality. It should not be used as a veto on thought. A society that treats every intellectual failure as a precursor to violence will not mature. It will only grow more anxious and brittle.

Malaysia was not embarrassed by a bad question. Bad questions occur everywhere. What draws scrutiny, both domestic and international, is the criminalisation of speech that poses no credible threat. A confident country corrects error with argument. An insecure one reaches for handcuffs.

Rex Tan may have failed a test of journalistic judgment. That is a matter for editors and employers. The more consequential test belongs to Malaysia. The question is not whether flawed ideas should be criticised. They should. The question is whether the state and society can tell the difference between intellectual failure and criminal danger.

A bad question should have prompted a better conversation. Instead, it revealed how easily fear, outrage, and racial reflexes can be mobilised to justify overreach. That is the real lesson of this episode, and it is one we must confront honestly if we are serious about justice, dignity, and national maturity.