

People Power

By ‘Disguised Identity’

Sahlan Diver’s *Subud Vision* article, ‘In Subud We Have No Beliefs’ is flawed. It makes no mention of Subud’s most pervasive belief: ‘In Subud, we have no leaders.’

I remember sitting with some others outside a conference hall in the early Seventies, waiting for Bapak to arrive. I made a suggestion about Subud, and was immediately put down with, ‘In Subud, we have no leaders’ (knowing laughter all round). What the speaker was really saying was, ‘In Subud we already have a leader (Bapak) — we do everything the way he tells us, so we have no need of other leaders, especially of any leader who dares to contradict Bapak.’

Don’t get me wrong. I have no objection to Subud members being led by Bapak’s excellent advice on a myriad of subjects. What I object to is our dutifully following the minutiae: you must do the opening words exactly like this; you must always appoint helpers exactly like this; you must invest in and run enterprises exactly the way Bapak advises you; while at the same time claiming that no one is leading us. And now that Bapak is dead we have Ibu Rahayu telling us exactly how to do things (for example, her recent precise instructions about the opening words) and I expect when she dies, we will have the International Helpers taking over the leadership and laying down the Subud law with a close interpretation of Bapak and Ibu’s legacy.

This ‘no leaders’ myth goes beyond our upper echelons, however, and it is at the group level that I am going to suggest it creates the biggest problems.

In the early Eighties I got ill, and had to take a year’s break from going out to Subud meetings. They say if you take a break from anything, when you come back to it you see it with new eyes. My first encounter on my return was a regional meeting, a very bad-tempered affair, where a psychologist was recommending we all took training in meeting technique. This was the first piece of a jigsaw puzzle, a puzzle about the state of Subud, but at the time I’d only been given the first piece, so I couldn’t see the picture properly. I thought, ‘We don’t need psychologists. This arguing is all a purification; in time we will learn to work together.’ You see, Subud disagreement wasn’t new to me. I’d seen a lot, done a lot myself. Even as an applicant I’d witnessed fierce disputes between helpers. After Ramadan each year there were usually heartfelt apologies and we’d hope to move on. Like most other members I’d been brought up in Subud with the idea that this was all part of the latihan process –to be expected – and like the latihan it would all work out for the better, given time.

A few years further on and I moved house to a new area and a new group. We men were testing to choose a new chair, and everyone received it wasn’t for them. At this point the outgoing Chair berated us. It seemed he was willing to have us all ask God, but only if God’s reply aligned with his preachy ideas about ‘demonstrating our commitment to Subud’. I said I thought it was ridiculous that he was being so critical, because the ladies also were testing and perhaps it was right that one of them should be Chair. Sure enough, they had received very positive for one lady. At the meeting to confirm the appointment, I regret to this day that I didn’t demand a public apology from the outgoing Chair for his bullying and inappropriate attitude

in the testing session, but I didn't, because the Zonal Chair was present, a man who liked his harmony (and at that time, so did I). But, another piece of the jigsaw had been put in place.

I am going to mention this ex-chairman a lot, so I will name him – ‘Nicholas Smith’. That's nothing like his real name, so don't play guessing games! My purpose in writing about him is not just to sound off. I am a bigger person than that and I am making a bigger point, as you will see. Also, I have been around a bit in my time in Subud and I have seen a lot of Nicholas Smiths. I believe my readers will also know their own Nicholas Smiths. In most places you find them; they usually have money or a big house, or both; they exhibit a friendly, outgoing personality combined with largesse: many group functions will be held at their house; often the regular group latihans will be held there. When Nicholas Smith has a rare spell off the committee, he'll be prominent in the helpers' group, and vice versa. My Nicholas Smith doesn't even have to be helper or committee to be in a position of control; he's a permanent member of an independent legal entity responsible for the local Subud finances. Nicholas Smith will often have a wife. When he's not on the committee, she'll be on it, as his proxy representative. When he's not a regional helper, *she* will be a regional helper. So, if you think of various Subud centres, the name of a Nicholas Smith will often come to mind as the kingpin of each. Sometimes even an entire Subud country will have a readily identifiable Nicholas Smith.

I crossed swords with Nicholas Smith many times. Each time I was being given a piece of my Subud jigsaw puzzle, but I was slow to see the full picture. Once he over-ruled an expenses claim, in contradiction of his own chairman, because *he* didn't think I should claim it. Another time when I was the only candidate standing for Chair he deliberately stood to block my bid, even though he'd been Chair many times previously. (Predictably he got what he wanted, the testing favouring him as the ‘safe’ candidate). Another time at a group party, somebody asked a question that required some mental arithmetic. I did the sum in my head; the person was impressed, but Nicholas Smith chose to make a big thing out of it, questioning my math to try to prove me wrong (perhaps I was wrong, I really didn't care). There are many other incidents and I wasn't the only victim. One member refused to do latihan at Nicholas Smith's house. I put it down to petulance on the part of the member. In reality it was another piece of the jigsaw, but I didn't see it. Once when I considered starting a new group, I contacted former members who'd all left Subud after disputes with Nicholas Smith or his wife. The lack of even an acknowledgment of my letters from these former members spoke volumes.

The final straw came at a Subud party when Nicholas Smith acted in a way extremely disrespectful to myself and my wife. He apologised, but it was too late; the damage was done. Not that I couldn't forgive his behaviour. I did forgive him. But his behaviour had given me the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle and having seen the whole picture it was impossible for me to turn back the clock.

What I saw was that our Subud inter-personal encounters are *not* evidence of long term progress specially guided by Almighty God, but instead they are evidence of the predictable, repeatable circular outcome of psychological interaction in any small group of human beings. I saw how Nicolas Smith always acted so as to secure a position of superior status. But worse than that, I saw how Subud is constituted as the perfect playground for the Nicholas Smith's of this world. They get their position through testing, and it's thereby unassailable. You can't vote them off as helpers; you can't vote for them as committee. You can't question their policies, because they ‘were tested as being right for the role at this time’.

Once the picture fell into place, everything became clear. The ex-members who

couldn't stand to think about Subud any more, the member who didn't want to latihan in Nicholas Smith's house, were victims of psychological abuse. Tired of being pawns in an unchecked Subud power game they'd done the only thing they could to protect themselves. The bad-tempered arguments between members at meetings come about because people aren't given what they want. They are instead given 'what they are given', by the most pushy personalities who obtain a position of dominance over the group and become a law unto themselves.

There's a very funny line in the comedy movie, 'Our Man In Havana', based on the Graham Greene book, where the sinister chief of police explains, 'We never torture the middle classes, because they would be outraged. We only torture the lower classes – we only torture those who give us permission to torture.' I often think Subud is like that – a collection of people who constantly acquiesce to being taken advantage of. How does this come about? Probably because going to latihan is not like going to a prayer meeting or sermon, it's more akin to someone going to the gym with the intention of gaining a 'six-pack'. We go to get ourselves a 'spiritual six-pack'. It's all about the self, it's essentially a selfish activity – morality and concern for our fellow members, or whether anyone is acting out of line to cause harm to others is the least of our concerns.

I hear rumours of a new organisation for the latihan starting. To those people I say, *Please*, whatever you do, fix this problem of 'Person Power' and put power back truly in the hands of the people.