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Fight for women deprived of their rights

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A POPULAR song over the airwaves is Nikita by mega star Elton John. It's not about Nikita Khrushchev, late leader of the now-defunct Soviet Union, who once banged his shoe on the lectern while addressing the UN General Assembly.

The song is about a lovely Soviet girl, so out of place among then Communist party leaders standing on the crenelated walls of the Kremlin. Watch the video and hear the song on the cassette and you'll love her too. Provided she ditches the ideology, that is.

If and when Elton John does a concert in Malaysia I shall be there to cheer, too. This is in the event that the show is given the green light by the authorities.

This last must be said as the debate on social ills is continuing in the Bahasa Press in the wake of the KRUmania Mega Tour concerts. Coincidentally though, reportage on other issues of the day have a bearing on the matter. Proved again is that some things are not cut and dried.

As has been widely publicised, the pop group's nation-wide tour was suddenly disrupted after its successful launch in Johor Baru. Shows scheduled in Muar, Sungai Petani and Kangar were summarily banned, and Selangor too was ready to do likewise. Cited as reason by some newspapers was "negative Western influence".

Certainly asked is why Muar disallowed it after the Johor Baru show. Did local authorities feel that the smaller town's youths are more susceptible to norms alien to Asian values?

As for Selangor, a spokesman explained it was merely being consistent after banning the Michael Jackson concert in Shah Alam despite earlier approval. But as is known the Cabinet approved two of the Jackson concerts in Kuala Lumpur and there was no ruckus during the shows and no social problems thereafter. Among the audience were Selangoreans.

The American singer had also performed in Brunei, staunchly Islamic, with the Sultan himself footing the bill. There were no social problems there either.

One sometimes wishes then that matters relating to social justice too would be given the same serious consideration by our brothers' keepers.

One example is as reported recently concerning the plight of American convert Patricia Noor Faridah Abdullah deprived of meeting her two children after being divorced by her Malaysian husband despite permission by the Syariah court on visitation rights.

Fifteen months after losing custody of the children Faridah was able to see them for a total of six hours!

We now wait to see whether in the end justice will be done in her case. A touching letter of appeal was published later, addressed to Pusat Islam, Jabatan Ugama Islam, Jabatan Perdana Menteri, mosques and surau "to rally behind our sister in Islam and do what is right".

Revealing was the disclosure by a Syariah court lawyer who had to plead anonymity when she spoke about numerous other cases where errant husbands ignored Syariah court decisions.

Why the plea for anonymity? Because Syariah lawyers have to renew their licences annually. Mentioned was the case of one lawyer whose licence was not renewed after a high profile case.

Sometimes reported are cases on non-payment of maintenance by husbands to divorced wives, some with children to support. Such rights and that of

visitation applicable in one State can be ignored in another.

Welcomed therefore is the Government's plan to have uniform Syariah laws.

There is then the special report on incest with victims ranging from eight months to 23 years and the offenders from 18 to 65 years. No pressure groups take up the cudgels on behalf of the victims, many of them Muslims.

It is in the context of such situations that one understands the nature of a question as posed in the religious column of a Malay newspaper recently.

The question: "My grandfather till now does not allow his grandchildren, especially the young ones, to be outside the house at sunset and during the Maghrib prayers. According to him that is the time jins and satan will come out of their hiding places to tempt people. Is such a prohibition reasonable and logical in these days? Surely such superstition and nonsense should be cast aside?"

The answer given: "The prohibition imposed by your grandfather is indeed reasonable and I support it. Everyone, especially young girls, should be in the house by sunset. As for Malays, whatever they may be doing outside, bicycling, playing hide-and-seek or playing soccer, they must come back inside the house."

As is often said, a newspaper is the reflection of the society it serves, its values, beliefs and idiosyncracies also. It is in that context that we must draw our conclusion on another item in the religious column of the Malay newspaper.

It has to do with a story which was circulated here and there after the recent Haj pilgrimage.

The story as narrated by the paper's writer, Md Daud Che, goes thus: "...Four days after returning from the Holy Land, an old friend who once worked in the national news agency (Bernama), Othman Ahmad, asked if it was true that a strange thing had happened there. It was about a husband and wife who were transformed into snakes just before returning home by air. It was said that they were from Kelantan.

"It was alleged that they were the owners of an eating shop. Their stall was doing a roaring business because they had used powder from a snake's heart or its skin to make their food more delicious. That was why they became snakes when about to return home. It was alleged also that Tabung Haji officials and MAS stewardesses were aware of this. After the couple's transformation as snakes they were put into a box and despatched to Jeddah's airport..."

The story is totally false, the writer replied, and added: "What's strange is that a lot of people believed such utter nonsense."

How we wish then that our brothers' keepers would deal with people who concoct and spread rubbish and falsehood which indeed demeans the religion itself.

We now understand why it was that not so very long ago that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad chided Malay publications for publishing ghost stories. It is now the year of the MSC (Multi Media Super Corridor), barely three years to the next millennium and on to Vision 2020. And yet there are stories about people being turned into snakes!

Along the same road, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim speaks repeatedly about Asian Renaissance. Hence the recent seminar on Iqbal, one of the earlier renaissance men. Wasn't it also said of Iqbal that he was against the mullahs who sided with the rich and kept the people ignorant of social justice and human understanding?

Would our brothers' keepers and social pressure groups fight for social justice too for such as Faridah, denied the right to meet her children,

and those other women deprived of their maintenance rights?
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