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Learning never to judge a book by its cover

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AT A time when loyalty to the company and employer is dying, in part due to the abundance of jobs, the recent demonstration by Malaysia Airlines employees in support of their company is an extraordinary event.

It is very rare for employees to take such an action to defend the honour of their company and their good name.

They must have felt very strongly about the criticisms levelled against them and their company to mount such a demonstration.

There must have, therefore, been something different in these recent attacks to provoke such a swift and strong response from the airline's employees.

The airline, whether as a state-owned corporation or as a privatized company, has been criticised and attacked many times before. Being put in a bad light is not new to the company and its employees.

So why did they protest this time? Could it be the parties making the latest allegations? Or was it the tone of their attacks?

Who made these attacks and what they attacked the airline for are well known. It all started with the haze.

It is understood that the attacks took place after the airline had taken upon itself the task of explaining to the authorities, in the first week of this month, the effects of the haze on its operations.

The report outlines the delays and cancellations of flights, safety measures and operational standards adopted during the haze and steps taken to minimise the inconvenience to passengers.

What the critics and passengers had probably not given sufficient thought to, and recognition of, before venting their anger on the airline, was safety.

Perhaps, in their eagerness to travel and to reach their destinations on time, they deliberately shut their minds to safety.

On the other hand, safety is a paramount consideration to the airline, the airport operator, the Department of Civil Aviation and the Meteorological Department. They had to constantly alter operating standards and procedures to take into account the visibility at different airports at different times.

A plane which may be able to land in Kuching with a visibility of 600m during the day, may require a visibility of 1,200m if the conditions in Ipoh, for example, are hazy.

Visibility at all airports was monitored on an hourly basis. A plane leaving Kuala Lumpur for Kuching - a trip which requires more than an hour - may depart at a time when the latter airport was still operational. However, the time it arrives Kuching, the airport may have been closed.

Of course public concern for safety and, therefore, their treatment of Malaysia Airlines would have been different had the same tragedy that struck the Garuda airliner in Medan taken place in this country as well.

Then the airline would probably have been blamed for operating in an unsafe environment.

Blaming just one party cannot be fair when several were involved in determining whether a flight took off or not. When a delay or cancellation did take place, even more parties were involved - restaurants that prepared food for the affected passengers, the hotels that accommodated them and bus companies that transported them.

Yes, Malaysia Airlines is not always right. Its flights are not punctual

all the time. And there are times when its ground and cabin services are not up to expectations. Although Malaysia Airlines services are recognised as among the best in the world, there is still room for improvement.

But to single the airline out for attack at a time when everybody else was also affected by the haze cannot have been the fair thing to do.

I am reminded of my own experience when, during the 1990 Visit Malaysia Year, my newspaper, New Straits Times, highlighted many complaints against Malaysia Airlines (mostly in the form of letters to the editor).

I was given a thorough lesson on aviation by none other than the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Malaysia Airlines has since improved vastly. Then, it did not even have enough planes to fly.

In a different context, unless a person travels widely enough and uses as many airlines as possible, he may not be able to make a fair judgement of his regular airline.

There is also a tendency among some local travellers to have two sets of expectations - a higher set for the national airline and a lower one for other airlines.

This is not wrong, but sometimes they tend to become too demanding and over-critical with the national airline. However, when they travel with foreign airlines, they become meek and undemanding.

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