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Lessons from history on how to better handle today's problems

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IN the political treatise *Taj-us Salatin* (The Crown of Kings), by 17th century Malay philosopher Buchara al-Jauhari, several chapters are dedicated to the question of how the advisors to the King ought to be honest and open about the advice and information they give to the ruler.

Three centuries before the age of Information Technology, al-Jauhari was well into the world of immediate communication and information retrieval and dissemination.

He understood the need for rapid, efficient communication and dissemination of information. He regarded the flow of information as one of the most vital operational features of any state, and argued that without precise reports to the King, the entire kingdom would be imperiled. For al-Jauhari, nothing was too trivial to note. He insisted that the leadership of the state ought to be aware of the traffic of goods and labour, the condition of the rivers, quality of the harvest and daily management of the economy.

To this end, al-Jauhari placed great emphasis on the need for an open system of information exchange and on the need to cultivate a corps of trustworthy and reliable advisors and reporters. For him, it was the presence of these that would ensure that country was well informed and the rulers would not be deluded about the strength and weaknesses of the kingdom.

But the reality of the Malay world was not as pleasant as the ideal that al-Jauhari laboured for so long to build.

Al-Jauhari was responding to a problem that he had diagnosed as prevalent in the Malay world: the enduring tendency towards self-delusion and the inability to stare at problems in the face. Al-Jauhari was after all writing in 1602, nearly a century after the fall of Malacca.

What had exacerbated the collapse of the Malacca sultanate was the tendency of its leaders to avoid the problems that were painfully evident. Worse still was their tendency to underestimate their opponents and neglect their own weaknesses. Malacca had grown rich and its people complacent. In the event of a crisis, the kingdom was not able to defend itself.

The *Sejarah Melayu* narrates how the courtiers and advisors to the Sultan of Malacca boasted that the Portuguese could never breach the walls of their city and that there was no need to fear their enemy. Their preparations for the conflict were thus lackadaisical. With the enemy at their doorstep, the advisors to the Sultan merely scoffed at the guns of the Portuguese. And so it came to pass that the city of Malacca, which had within its walls nearly 3,000 guns and pieces of artillery, could be conquered and razed to the ground by the vastly-outnumbered Portuguese. Somewhere along the line, those who ought to have warned the Sultan kept silent. Out of awe for their leader, and their desire to keep their jobs and privileges, they deluded themselves and their Sultan. And they paid dearly for their silence.

A similar story is found repeated throughout the history of the Malay peoples of the archipelago. As late as the 1970s, Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer was lamenting the fact that the peoples of the region were reluctant to confront the pressing realities around them. Looking at famous hikayat such as the *Babad Tanah Jawi*, Toer notes that the peoples of the archipelago seemed more inclined to believe fiction and

myths, to decorate themselves with titles, rather than to confront the realities of colonialism, and neo-colonialism.

In today's situation, the response to the haze crisis serves as a good example of this culture of silence at work.

For months, nearly half of Southeast Asia has been suffering the blight of cross-border pollution. This phenomenon is an environmental problem caused by unscrupulous business practices, poor communication, lack of surveillance and supervision, mismanagement, negligence and corruption. Yet Malaysian journalists who have travelled to the regions concerned and risked their lives to get to the truth are now being told not to discuss the matter too much, for fear of drawing negative attention. Recently, Malaysian academics have been told not to make statements to the foreign Press or publicise their findings too widely.

One cannot help but wonder whether the problem that al-Jauhari diagnosed so long ago is re-surfacing again. Is this yet another example of establishment that would prefer to avoid looking at the truth in the face?

The decision to stop academics from talking to the Press can only be described as a knee-jerk reaction which has since proven to be counter-productive. Far from discouraging people from talking about the matter, the move has only attracted more negative attention to the situation.

Knowing how the foreign media operates in this region, the establishment ought to have guessed that they would only be too happy to report on this latest attempt to gag the academicians of the country as proof of a paranoid and hypersensitive establishment.

But putting aside the problem of having to deal with the meddlesome Western media, we are still confronted with the obvious questions: Will the haze disappear if we stop talking about it? Would the country responsible for the haze crisis have reacted any better or faster had the Malaysian Press stood by complacently and pretended that there was nothing wrong? And will the haze not re-appear next year when Malaysia hosts the 1998 Commonwealth Games?

The Malaysian scientists, academics and journalists who have spoken up so far have merely been doing their duty and acting as the responsible professionals that they are. It is not their fault that their words have been twisted by the foreign media.

But this is not a new problem: when Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke out against the activities of currency manipulators, his comments were taken out of context and portrayed in a negative light. But this should not deter us from speaking, especially when the truth is on our side.

We should be grateful to those who have shown the courage to think and speak the truth. Their integrity does us proud. The history of the Malays as a people would have been different if there had been more individuals such as these.

If there is one thing that our history has taught us, it is that silence, in the face of crisis, is not the solution.

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