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Public apathy about cleanliness symptomatic of slow social development

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TV VIEWERS, who watched the news last Sunday night, saw the familiar face of the Prime Minister, in the not so familiar mode of full-on fury.

Usually seen coolly fielding questions from the Press, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was this time angrily rebuking Malaysians who had literally turned Jalan Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur into a dump.

Drinking cups and cans, wrappers, cigarette butts and plastic bags littered the road, right at the heart of the city and in plain view of tourists and visiting businessmen and officials.

"Do they (the litterbugs) think others are coolies who have to clean up their dirt?," he huffed. "We are not their coolies!"

The lack of civic consciousness that angered Dr Mahathir that day is at the root of several problems that go beyond mere littering.

It has also given birth to horrific public toilets too dirty to use, to illegal dumpsites, to the vandalism of public utilities and to the pollution of our rivers.

It's why apartment inhabitants throw their trash in the stairwell instead of taking it down to the garbage bin, why parents in public toilets let their children urinate in the sink rather than help them negotiate the toilets themselves, and why some public phones have been vandalised beyond repair.

There seems to be an emotional detachment from personal actions and the results they leave behind.

People's out-of-sight-out-of-mind mentality is costing the country a fortune in clean-up work, as well as irreparable damage to Malaysia's reputation as a fast developing nation.

How many times have we read letters in the newspapers from foreigners who said the lack of public cleanliness had marred their visit?

How many pictures have we seen of nauseating dumpsites crawling with vermin right at our doorsteps?

The alarming attitude that has given rise to these horrors has also taken on a perverse new twist.

In May, 27-year-old Mohd Khairuddin Osman was minding his own business walking past the Putra Ria flats near Jalan Bangsar when someone decided to get rid of a brick by lobbing it out a window several floors up.

In an unbelievable stroke of bad luck, the brick landed squarely on Khairuddin's head. He died shortly after.

Other items which have reportedly been flung out apartment windows include a blender and a bicycle. There have been enough cases of this kind of rubbish-throwing for it to earn a name: high-rise littering.

Local authorities have often been accused of being lax in their clean-up work, but however much this may be true the onus still remains with the public to clean up after themselves in the first place.

Public apathy about cleanliness appears to be symptomatic of our slow progress towards social development.

While the country has been busily erecting skyscrapers, towers and other such paens to its own economic success, Malaysians haven't yet learned to keep up by developing a culture that's appropriate to their new lives.

In other countries, it is a point of collective pride to have streets clear of debris and to have toilets clean enough to sleep in.

In Germany for example, the people are intent on making sure that the detritus of everyday life ends up where it belongs - in garbage bins - and

even take the trouble to separate their waste and recycle, an idea that could not conceivably take root here now.

The only visible blight in German cities is vandalism, usually done with spraycans, a phenomenon that some have put down to frustration at the high rate of unemployment.

Malaysians, who are enjoying the biggest boom in their country's history, could hardly put up the same defence.

Frequent gotong royong campaigns organised by the public and private sectors are temporary measures at best, because they have consistently failed to instill a long-term sense of responsibility about cleanliness.

There is already a RM500 fine for littering, but the authorities have acknowledged that stiffening fines and penalties is not the answer.

Fed up and at their wit's end, the authorities are now proposing a law to sentence litterbugs to do community service in the hope of shaming them into responsibility.

It's unfortunate that this is the direction we've been forced to take. Our neighbours across the Causeway are famous for their clean streets, but so are the draconian measures they've had to take to get there.

Increasing the number and severity of measures against littering and other acts of civic carelessness might give Malaysian streets the polish that authorities want, but they would also ultimately reduce the public to the level of an ill-mannered child.

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