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Tragedy of the innocents

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I AM an anguished mother in the midst of a long-term child custody battle. I am assertive, well educated and unintimidated by authority. For two years I have been fighting, within the Syariah system, to return a pair of traumatised, innocent young children to their rightful custodian, me.

The father of the children is an abusive, philandering alcoholic with a title. He divorced me and was given custody by lying blatantly to a Syariah high court judge, under oath. He has been in contempt of court repeatedly for refusing to acknowledge visitation orders which neither the court nor police claim they are able to enforce.

I have one of the best Syariah attorneys in the country representing me and his counsel has been exemplary. I have the support of my ex-husband's family. I have contacts in high places who have attempted advocacy work on behalf of myself and the children. Yet nothing has been accomplished.

My son was two and my daughter three when our ordeal began. I told my husband I no longer loved him. He went berserk. He demanded I leave. When I refused and contacted an attorney, he threatened to harm the children. After I left, heartbroken, he gave the children to his first wife and moved his girlfriend in. He did not even bother to visit the children for the next seven months. Because I showed up at the first wife's home with a court order, he ran off with the children.

The succeeding months were a tragedy beyond comprehension for the children, for myself. They have been and continue to be used as pawns by a very sick man who has no compassion for nor understanding of what his behaviour is inflicting upon them, two priceless innocents who have no voice and only want to be with their mommy.

I cannot look at a child without crying. I avoid public places, television, my friends and family who have children. I have lost 20 pounds. I have teetered on the edge of madness more than once. Yet when I have to make a phone call, be in court, write a statement, I am there, 100 per cent.

I hold on for the children. I have found my refuge in Islam, in prayer. My faith sustains and empowers me. I have read everything I could get my hands on regarding Syariah family law. It is so just, so inspiring, so genuinely a reflection of the compassion, the beneficence of Allah towards women and children. It is my duty as a Muslim and my all-consuming responsibility as a mother to see it implemented.

So why is it that after two years of doing everything right within a system whose supposed primary concern is to ensure custody cases are resolved quickly for the welfare of the children that this case is taking so long? And why is it that everyone is really sorry to hear the father is violating the judge's generous visitation order and has denied those poor babies access to their mommy for nearly eight months but no one does anything?

Could it be his title? Could it be that I am an American and he is a Bumiputera? Or maybe it's because I am a convert and he's a born Muslim (who, in our five years of marriage, managed to commit just about every sin in the Quran). Or could it be that the Syariah Court system in this country is in a minor state of chaos and anything more complicated and less fun than a khalwat charge gets shoved in the corner?

Yes, I am angry. My children are crying. Every day, their scars, which they will carry for life, become a little deeper and the inability to

comfort them brings forth a silent scream of unspeakable pain. That there are hundreds, maybe thousands of mothers in Malaysia alone sharing my plight is almost too much to bear.

Children raised without mothers rarely grow up to become model citizens. Surely it behooves those in power to set aside the latest financial statistics and confront a few human statistics. With more than just polished rhetoric, empty platitudes or a token acknowledgement abandoned after a few days.

Malaysia is a wonderful country, Dr Mahathir a superb Prime Minister. Extraordinary things are possible here, unlike the US which is too big, too fragmented. I have no illusions my case would have been handled better there.

I believe in the vision of 2020. I believe that helping a few thousand crying mothers and their children be reunited is integral to that dream. And I believe that the magnificent echo of our laughter, the radiance of our joy, the palpable, glorious manifestation of divine justice served is too important, too valuable to ignore.

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