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Students must study, not burn

STUDENT days are carefree. Studying whether in schools or in institutions of higher learning entails only one responsibility. That is to study. Whilst learning facts and principles, students in their formative years imbue themselves with moral values that would chart their lifelong career path as good workers and responsible citizens. They have nothing else to worry about. Financing studies is the headache of parents. For those who do not have the means to pursue higher education, the Government has made available enormous funds that are disbursed as scholarships and loans. It has also established, developed and nurtured a sound and vast education system, comprising private and public sector schools, universities and other institutions. The education they collectively provide is acknowledged to be among the best in the world. For that facility, students must be grateful.

To take to the streets is not an expression of gratitude. "Burn, baby, burn" might have been a catch-all emotive slogan that galvanised many young in other countries in other times. But it is not Malaysian to protest violently. More unMalaysian is selling one's time and actions for a fistful of dollars. And it is a shame that some students have sold themselves and joined demonstrators to burn and destroy public and private property over the last several days.

Perhaps the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, recuperating from his illness, was goaded by this emotion when he reminded students on Sunday to concentrate on their studies. He rightly said that they, including undergraduates, should not be involved or allow themselves to be involved in reformasi demonstrations. Dr Mahathir made it clear that studies should be their priority, not activities that bring no benefit to them or the country. Already the country has had a bad press from the foreign media. Many foreign leaders have nothing but ill-will about the country. Burnings and demonstrations only give credence to these prejudiced negative reports and assessments.

Students, especially those who have come of age and are registered voters, have many other non-disruptive or non-destructive avenues to express their displeasure about their perceived shortcomings in the country, whether they are in the political system or in the judicial process. If they desire change they should seek the changes not through violent, street demonstrations. That is the way of other people. And we all know too well the consequences of violence. We have seen them in countries near and far. They are plainly no good for the country, especially its economic well-being.

We agree the young are idealists. But they should temper their idealism with the realities of life. As Dr Mahathir said the ultimate victims of breaking the laws of the land are the perpetrators themselves. They might find their studies terminated; their future careers evaporate into thin air. All because of a few hours of misguided expression of formented anger.

Punishment should be meted out to students apprehended for disrupting the peace. But the authorities should diligently search out those, who with a bagful of coins and persuasive rhetoric, have poisoned the minds of these students. They, the self-appointed leaders of change, live in the shadowy world of the night. But they must be caught, the sooner the better. It is the country that is at stake.

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