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Misguided finger-pointing has no place in a right-thinking society

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THE Universiti Malaya fire has sparked off a finger-pointing frenzy that is as distressing as the destruction of Dewan Tunku Cansellor.

Not least Puteri Umno's stunning call (delivered by party chief Azalina Othman Said) for the resignation of Datuk Dr Anuar Zaini Mohd Zain, the vice-chancellor of UM, by way of accepting full responsibility for the fire; for the publication of a dreadful magazine; and for the distribution of not-very-nice flyers ahead of yesterday's visit by the Prime Minister.

The influential Utusan Malaysia, both through its Page One treatment of Azalina's original statement and through formidable cartoon strip-satirist Senyum Kambing appears not to disagree with the head of Puteri Umno.

Others implied that the cursory and very public assessment of Dr Anuar's performance as V-C might indeed produce a better candidate for the top UM post.

We have neither been told the malaise of UM nor the remarkable qualities a new V-C would bring to Lembah Pantai.

Diving in on Saturday was Azimi Daim of Umno Youth, lending credence to Azalina's thoughts.

(Azimi, for the record, acted quickest during the Datuk Zainol Mat Isa controversy. He told Utusan Zainol should resign when Umno's disciplinary panel found him guilty of money politics. Azimi, too, was subsequently reprimanded by the same panel.)

Without doubt, we are not accustomed with the work of Dr Anuar nor that of Azimi and Azalina, and we would be clueless if asked to professionally evaluate the performance of a V-C, Umno Supreme Council members like Azimi and Azalina, and, for that matter, the work of others outside our profession.

Note that journalists exercise their journalistic licence very, very sparingly, and even then we are most hesitant. We sometimes prefer convoluted, roundabout phrases to a plain, spit-it-out style lest it afflicts injustice on someone.

The inherent danger in a finger-pointing campaign is that this small group of people can gang up or be persuaded to lobby for the removal of someone's nemesis, or simply to sack people at random, as a part of the national habit.

Now, there was a fire in Universiti Putra Malaysia's computer lab. Should its V-C go too? When shall a public figure be adjudged to have fallen on his sword?

Is there somewhere a group of eminent people who decide these things? Of course, accountability and a culture of taking full responsibility are not in themselves bad, but given the amount of bad blood clogging the collective consciousness, there will never be a shortage of easy targets to lynch, denigrate and summarily judge and punish.

Indeed, the new knee-jerk, kangaroo-court manner of problem-solving is a big worry since their perpetrators believe themselves to be perfectly sensible, objective little souls.

To activate the mob-mentality, to get someone to resign and to expect, lo and behold, troubles and difficulties of all proportions to vanish, is absurd.

The UM fire investigators could discover a severe security lax, or even a deliberate or tacit act of looking the other way. (Now, where were the security guards?) These are, for now, very nasty, spiteful thoughts, and

the investigators should not be pre-empted.

The fate of the V-C is not the most pressing issue. The disquiet lies (if proven) in the evil act of sabotage, scare-tactics and chaos-inducing recipes creeping into national life via the campuses, a suspicion enhanced by the subsequent fire at UPM.

That is a matter for the police and not for V-Cs to delve into. Politically, should that be the case, the Opposition ought to be concerned, as elements within the Opposition have spewed considerable spite and venom into the political turf.

They have scapegoated for political mileage. To facilitate the spread of hate, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been singled out for vilification.

Websites with names like MahaFiraun entered homes through the Internet. Dr Mahathir was branded anti-Ulama and power hungry. Segments of the Opposition cannot be absolved of blame.

Impressionable students were brainwashed. They were told hate equals political awakening, conviction, idealism. They devour lustily the hate literature, thinking this would, curiously, save the nation.

Anti-Government feelings in the campuses is yesterday's news. The insecurities of the so-called disenfranchised segments have been endlessly milked. They became "anti-wealth" overnight. Pro-Pas and Keadilan candidates took most of the posts in campus elections.

Anti-Government sentiments wafted their way into big corporations and Government departments for all the wrong reasons.

Cynicism is entrenched. Yet, the emergence of militancy will be an eye-opener, a potential groundbreaking incident that will again alter political equilibrium.

It will accentuate the evils of a misguided political campaign that thrives on hate, that exploits the inadequacies and insecurities of people caught in the rat race.

The Opposition may actually lose support and sympathy, especially in the campuses, if indeed the hallowed Dewan was destroyed to prevent a dialogue between the Prime Minister and students. It would be Umno's turn to benefit by default.

Replacing the V-C will not sweep away the anti-Government feelings. Dialogues, visits (the PM and the Deputy Prime Minister are already on the campus trail) and debates in the media will help clarify the issues given the muddied political turf.

Practical ideas are in short supply. As usual, there is an opinion surplus. Young Umno leaders have not been able to connect with the campus crowd, unmistakably, a key battleground in 2004.

For now, comments that are flippant and emotive could cloud the issue needlessly. It is sad that the resignation demand came from Azalina (she said Saturday there is no personal grudge in this call by Puteri Umno).

She is a fresh-face who has infused into Malaysian politics a welcome dose of verve. She combines intellect with a pronounced swashbuckling bearing, a get-up-and-go attitude.

She vividly knows how the Umno revival ought to begin, by touching Malaysian hearts through simple and tangible gestures like reading to the blind and helping the unwary climb out of a legal morass.

That hard-done-by Umrah pilgrims turned to MCA's Michael Chong is a cruel indictment of the service qualities of Umno, and of Pas for that matter.

Azalina will not, however, be proud of her latest contribution to national debate.

When in doubt, invoke voices of reason and sense, and not activate the mob logic.

Azalina shall not be judged solely by her latest comments. That is a prayer because dedicated, intellectual young politicians of the Azalina mould must not falter.

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