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Restraint cannot be one-way affair

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"THE Malays are too nice, too accommodating". These are common comments within the community when dealing with situations which are deemed not to their advantage.

At the height of the Suqiu controversy, similar phrases were extensively used, especially among the Malays who were concerned about the repercussions from the demands, which they felt were capable of not only affecting the position of the Malays, but the nation's social equilibrium.

These views are actually a reflection of frustration from some segments of the Malay community who feel that their leaders are practising too much restraint in an effort to accommodate the interest of other races.

Such restraint is actually not confined to domestic affairs, but even practised when dealing with neighbouring nations.

If Malaysians remember the story of how eight Kelantan forestry officers were arrested at the Malaysia-Thai border in the early 1990s, they would realise how much restraint was exercised by their leaders and their media.

The Thai authorities, including the then Governor of Narathiwat - the district where the officers were arrested - identified the detainees as those who had been stealing logs from their country.

Their media went to town with the story and even before the officers were put on trial, carried their photographs with headlines "These Are The Robbers of Our Logs" and so forth.

The articles were interspersed with the fact that those found guilty of such crimes were punishable by death.

Efforts by the Kelantan Government to post bail for the officers were turned down and only after repeated clandestine meetings between the state leaders and top Thai military officials were the forestry officers released on bail.

And that too after making very hefty payments in addition to using Wisma Putra's diplomatic network.

While the Thai media were having a field day reporting on the incident, they also took liberty at condemning the forestry officers even though the case was still being heard.

The Malaysian media which covered the incident stuck to the court hearings and restrained themselves from speculating that the officers were actually framed by the Thai authorities.

Fortunately, all ended well but it was an episode - though forgotten by most Malaysians - which should be seen as a reflection of the lopsidedness of affairs between neighbouring nations.

A more recent event was the way the Indonesian media stirred up emotions among its fishing community when the Malaysian Navy shot and killed an Indonesian fisherman in Malaysian waters.

It was reported that the Indonesian fishermen refused to give up and instead tried to ram their vessel into the Malaysian Navy's patrol boat, thus resulting in the shooting.

Indonesian fishermen demonstrated at the Malaysian Embassy in Jakarta and were reportedly aggressive and very threatening.

On Monday, a very similar incident occurred. The only difference this time was that a Malaysian fisherman was shot and killed by the Indonesian Navy. It is doubtful that Malaysian fishermen would now gather in front of the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to protest the shooting.

While Malaysians practise such restraint against their neighbours, it is

doubtful that the "favour" is appreciated or will be reciprocated.

At the height of the Asian economic crisis, or rather financial crisis, numerous Indonesian and Thai media apart from their "armed-with-quotes" analysts, were berating Malaysia, its leaders and citizenry alike for the country's unconventional financial regime.

They too spoke of their superior democracy and equal treatment of the people.

The Malaysian media can of course likewise look into the affairs of their neighbours and find faults so as to show that the country is doing better than most others, if not for the purpose of distracting Malaysians from their own domestic problems.

Playing up issues like the suppression of the Pattani Muslim separatists ("terrorists" is the term used by the Thai media) and the quelling of efforts by Aceh and Irian Jaya to secede would certainly place Malaysia on a higher democratic pedestal.

Sometimes, in practising restraint, the Malaysian authorities end up being used by both local activists and nations with vested interests.

Take the case of East Timor and Aceh, on which the Malaysian authorities denied permission for conferences to be organised by sympathisers.

The local organisers naturally lambasted the Malaysian leadership and pointed to Thailand which readily allowed East Timor and Aceh activists to conduct their conferences in Bangkok.

But none of these activists, in their praise for the Thais, ever questioned why Bangkok was never accommodating when it came to the interests of the Muslims in South Thailand.

Ironically, Malaysia, whom most local activists view as unsympathetic to the cause of "freedom fighters" in neighbouring countries, ended up being accused by the Thai and Indonesian authorities of supporting the Pattani and Aceh liberators.

A contradiction in itself. Is it because Malaysia chooses to exercise restraint and not meddle in the affairs of its neighbours?

It is uncanny that Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad chose to speak on media restraint in his winding-up speech at the party general assembly last Saturday.

He pointed out that the takeover of Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press by the MCA's investment arm was opposed because some Chinese wanted these papers to remain free and not be controlled by any political entities.

Interestingly he pointed out that these groups never opposed the control of The Star by the MCA. Was it because most Malays could understand English that made it all right for The Star to be restrained but not for the Chinese media to be so as the Malays would not know what was being said?

There is truth that most of the mainstream media, both in English and Malay, practise restraint when it comes to racial issues, be it out of a sense of responsibility or for fear that they might get into trouble with the authorities.

But in the end, the Malay media and Malay political leaders are the ones being reprimanded by the Malay community at large for being too nice, too accommodating, or worse, "giving others too much face".

The bottomline is restraint is a two-way affair. A unilateral effort is a one-way ticket to disaster.

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