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Trial by fire?

WE share the people's shock over the fiery destruction of Universiti Malaya's Dewan Tunku Canselor. It was more than a hall, more than a landmark of the university.

It was a symbol of the nation's unbounded faith in the potentialities of its sons and daughters. It cradled the pride of the nation as it, year after year, bore witness to the solemn collection of scrolls by thousands of men and women, moulded in the finest tradition of the university and dedicated to the service of the nation. It was the shared legacy of all, irrespective of their political predilections.

But no more. It took many decades to lend the building its character, its feel and "soul". It took the brief rage of a fire to destroy it. Its charred remains are not only mourned by the citizens of the university but also by the rakyat. Symbols and heritage are the wealth of every Malaysian. They belong to the people.

The people have the right to demand a thorough investigation and a full explanation on the tragedy. If it was caused by an act of negligence, then it reflects poorly on the supervision and maintenance culture of the university authorities. But the question of what ignited the pre-dawn fire, hours before the commencement of the "Symposium on The Re-affirmation of the Idealism of Undergraduates in the New Millennium" will haunt the people. Like it or not, it must be acknowledged that until and unless proven otherwise, many people, no matter how circumspect, will argue that the incident is too much of a coincidence.

Particularly disturbing is the possibility, as expressed by vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Anuar Zaini Mohd Zain, that the fire could have been the work of arsonists. If it is proven true, then this was not just another fire. Nor was it a mere violation of law and order. It would be a national shame. It would point to a greater underlying tragedy - the existence of belligerent and obdurate undergraduates on the campus, whose politics of rage are influenced by the certain quarters with vested interests.

As it is, the central issue in the destruction of the DTC now resonates far beyond the questions of how and why it happened. Recent developments such as the fomenting of anti-government fervour, by the publication of Varsiti 2001 and distribution of pamphlets calling for demonstrations against the July 1 visit of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad point to the possibility of a certain degeneration of the student polity. A degeneration marked by the decline in academic achievements, particularly among the Malay male students.

Plainly, these are disconcerting developments. And they bode no benefit for the university, Malays and the nation. The undergraduates should not abdicate their responsibilities to harvest knowledge and contribute to the making of the university as a world class seat of learning no less than Oxford, Cambridge, Yale or Harvard.

There is no doubt that the Opposition would harp on these happenings as an indictment of the Government. Less hypocritical people have a better word for them: hooliganism. We would say that these developments are the results of the Opposition's attempted politicisation of university campuses. Ironically, as the politics of hate takes control of the students, the university authorities seem to shy away from firm action.

Our undergraduates should stop indulging in irresponsible politics and

wallowing in academic mediocrity. They should not fall into the Opposition's trap who are trying to disrobe the young of their idealism to further their political ends. The authorities must act fast to rid our campuses of pernicious politics. The lofty aims of our seats of learning must be honoured.

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