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Kadir missing the point by accepting token apology from `Time`

Shamsul Akmar

CULTURE, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir should be congratulated for coming out "victorious" on two occasions this week.

First was his success to get the Time magazine to apologise for its Feb 11 edition which carried a sinister-looking cover with the title Inside Malaysia's Terror Network.

The second was his ability to prove that an accusation of hanky-panky in the tender for the Ministry's Citrawarna 2002 programme was baseless.

The accusation was made by the Tengku Bendahara of Selangor Tengku Azman Shah and was highlighted in The Malay Mail.

In both circumstances, Kadir and the Ministry were dealing with the Press - the only difference is that one is foreign and the other local.

However, much as Kadir seems to have come out tops in both, there are still several aspects that must not be left unattended.

In the case of the Time magazine, Time Inc international publisher Andrew Butcher apologised for any problems caused by the Feb 11 issue.

The Time issue had the Malaysian flag in the background with Osama bin Laden's shadowy profile on the star of the flag. There were also crossed guns at the bottom of the flag.

On the back cover of the issue was an advertisement placed by Tourism Malaysia, promoting Malaysia as a Truly Asian destination.

Thrown in with the apology, Butcher offered a free page or page spread advertorial in compensation.

Kadir claimed that the Time magazine had also asked the Prime Minister to write an article which would be prominently featured in the magazine.

It seems that the Cabinet has accepted the apology and that should be a reflection of how magnanimous Malaysian leaders are despite having been the target of derision by foreign magazines.

However, much as Butcher had apologised on behalf of Time, if one were to read the letter of apology, the publication was not sorry for the article, only for the problems it had caused.

To quote Butcher:

"Please accept my own personal apologies for this unfortunate ad placement."

In short, if the Tourism Malaysia advertisement was not carried on the back cover of the issue, then there would be no reason for Butcher or Time to apologise.

Splitting hairs it may seem, but the turn of events proved that such articles by the foreign publications should not be let off merely by an ambiguous apology which the magazine is not even offering to carry in its next issue.

On Thursday, US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director Robert S. Mueller said that Malaysia was definitely not the launch pad for terrorists involved in the Sept 11 attacks on New York and Washington as reported in the Jan 27 edition of Newsweek.

He described the article, which quoted a secret FBI report alleging that Malaysia was the primary operational launch pad for the attacks, as inaccurate.

The clarification from Mueller should appease ruffled Malaysian feathers over the effect of the article, but the question is whether Newsweek would now carry the clarification.

What appeared in the Feb 11 Time issue is no less damaging as it quoted

an unnamed US official as saying that Malaysia is "a perfect place for terrorist R and R (rest and recreation)".

When the article in Time appeared, Kadir was asked if his Ministry was going to consider withdrawing advertisements from foreign publications which gave negative impressions of Malaysia.

His reply was somewhat tame.

Kadir said the Government would not withdraw the advertisements and the Ministry preferred to meet the people who managed the magazines and explain to them the real situation rather than boycotting the publications.

His next sentence was actually very telling:

"If we choose to fight them, they will retaliate. So it is better for us to win them over through persuasive means."

It can only then be deduced that it is with such mental trappings which led to the preparedness of his Ministry and later on persuading the Cabinet to accept the ambiguous apology from Time magazine.

If the invitation by Time to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to write an article which would be featured prominently is of consideration, then it is again a very pathetic reaction.

Lest Kadir or any other Malaysian forget, any publication in the world would be more than eager to carry articles written by Dr Mahathir, simply because he is a controversial leader who speaks his mind.

The other "victory" by Kadir with The Malay Mail reflected a different scenario altogether.

Both he and the Ministry's secretary-general Datuk Tengku Alaudin Tengku Abdul Majid had every right to feel disturbed by the accusations of hanky-panky in tender awards by the Ministry.

Kadir and Tengku Alaudin seemed so disturbed that they were personally criticising The Malay Mail reporter who came up with the report.

The Malay Mail may have got on the wrong premise when highlighting the issue, but at the same time it was merely attempting to ensure that the Ministry realised what some individuals, including a person of position like the Tengku Bendahara of Selangor, is accusing it of.

What was required of Kadir and his Ministry was merely to clarify the issue and, if the allegations were baseless, to take on the person making the accusations.

Comparatively, The Malay Mail report and the Time magazine article are definitely poles apart in terms of damage inflicted. In any event, the Malaysian flag was truly desecrated by Time in that particular issue.

In fact, the whole issue by The Malay Mail was resolved after Kadir and Tengku Alaudin decided to hold the Press conference to explain the Citrawarna tender awards.

The point here is this - Kadir should have been as firm, if not more, with Time magazine than any local publication.

The fact that Kadir and the Ministry were prepared to accept even a token of an apology from the Western media does not reflect the kind of leadership Dr Mahathir had provided for the nation in standing up to them.

It is actually sad when a Minister of Kadir's stature ends up looking as if he was posturing to the West and fiercely firm when dealing with the locals.

Emancipation, after all, is not merely a case of shouting about it.

It has to be the unshackling of the mind first.

* shamsulmk@nstp.com.my

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