

26/10/2002

Malaysians have nothing to feel ashamed about

John Teo

I HEAR or read about Malaysians, who, when they are mixing with foreigners, are "ashamed" that they are Malaysians.

The Americans have a turn of phrase for those of their own who veer from the general American consensus: they are dismissively categorised as the "blame-America-first" crowd because no matter what the issue or its causes, this crowd invariably thinks the fault lies somewhere with America or Americans.

I do not necessarily place myself in the "my-country-right-or-wrong" category either. What I do know is that Malaysia, warts and all, stands up well to international scrutiny.

The most serious problem we face is one where we fail to "package" ourselves well enough in the things we do or say, not that what we do is flawed.

And that, in essence, is a failure or a lack of concern for what people might think, in our enthusiasm to obtain the results we are after.

For in the final analysis, it reflects our overriding national ethos: an achievement-orientated, devil-may-care attitude.

I want to relate this to the case of the 13-year-old alleged rape victim at the centre of a diplomatic tussle between Malaysia and the Philippines.

Now, let no one dispute my belief that, if proven, this case represents a reprehensible and despicable crime, no matter whose citizen it was perpetrated on.

I also happen to believe that the best way to protect the girl would be to strip her case of the potent mixture of politics and diplomacy.

The girl's legion of would-be protectors here and in the Philippines would serve her much better if they had spent less time in their armchair expressions of concern and "shame" and put more thought into practical means and suggestions to help the girl out in the legal predicament she now finds herself in.

This would include shaming the girl's parents, if that is possible, into owning up to their responsibilities to take care of their child.

Or isn't this the best opportunity for Malaysian and Filipino social organisations to concentrate on relieving their Governments' other burdens of state by taking over the "fight" to protect the girl, instead of expanding their energies crafting press statements in "protection" of the girl or faulting their governments?

There is then the matter of the demand for a Philippine apology from Malaysian authorities over this case, which again stirred up more inexplicable "shame" among certain Malaysians.

Let us go back to how it all started. The Philippine media broke the case over the deportation of illegal Filipino immigrants from Sabah, provoking outrage from Filipinos.

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo, perhaps edgy over the out-pouring of popular sentiment, issued a strong diplomatic protest to Malaysia.

Malaysia responded swiftly with the promise of swift police investigation and punishment for those guilty if indeed the case is proven. Now if the diplomatic note had asked for the same, there could conceivably be no sour taste from it.

There is then the question of whether a diplomatic protest is an appropriate instrument against a friendly country and addressed to a Prime Minister whom the Philippine President had earlier expressed great

admiration for, over the allegation of a heinous crime reported in the media.

The hurt on the part of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was unspoken but his "irritation" was made publicly known. Malaysian prime ministers are not known to express views on individual acts, much less alleged ones.

Besides, they would sooner be "doing" rather than "saying" something to sate the media's insatiable thirst for information. Herein could lie the crux of a cultural misunderstanding.

In the course of investigating the allegation, it has been established that the girl is Malaysian, not Filipino.

In official Malaysian eyes, the earlier "hurt" is now compounded because the diplomatic protest - not over the alleged rape but over the alleged rape of a Filipina - now does not have a leg to stand on.

The demand for an apology is a possible reflection of the extent of official Malaysian unhappiness over the way the case has been blown out of all proportions.

The least the Philippine side could do is to acknowledge officially that the protest note is without any basis and therefore null and void.

Malaysia could then even return the favour by thanking the Philippines for bringing to Malaysian official attention the possibility of a crime being perpetrated against one of our own.

Shameprone Malaysians have every right to decry the embarrassment of their Government "deporting" one of its own, something even Philippine politicians and officials somehow do not feel constrained to do.

But in spite of this and everything else that has been said and done over this episode, I still cannot find anything we can or have to be shameful about.

Rape, even by those officially tasked to protect us, is not something peculiar only to Malaysians and while the uncovering of particular cases of such a weakness will shame all of us, we can stand tall that in the case in question, with all its emotional and diplomatic complexities, our Government did not put one foot wrong.