

01/09/2002

Traitors and critics

Appa

Dear Son,

I AGREE with you that Malaysians should participate in public debates, particularly over issues affecting their future. The main reasons they don't, you contend, are fear, apathy and a lack of platforms to do so.

You say most fear getting into trouble with the Government. Too many people at the top are touchy about criticism and if some policy or leader is criticised, they or their party loyalists will try to link the dissenter with the Opposition or discredit him in other ways.

I can't argue with the fact that there have been cases where Malaysians who criticised the Government of the day have been accused of criticising the country. You lament that those in power twist arguments and generate publicity to make it appear as if the dissenting view is an offence against the nation.

I do recall a few cases of Malaysians being branded traitors because they criticised the Government overseas. I suppose you are right: Malaysians must differentiate between the Government in power and the country. If one criticises the Government, it does not mean he is a traitor to the nation. But I guess politicians would prefer to keep this distinction blurred so that ordinary people can be easily led.

You say many fear that they might become victims of intimidation and harassment if they become too vocal. And that there are also too many "as-long-as-my-family-and-I-are-okay..." types.

I agree that it might be too early to say whether Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a great leader. It is for history to judge.

Again, you are right when you say objectivity can be lost when anything is said about a serving leader and that those speaking about him could be motivated by a host of reasons including adoration or hatred, desire for favour or dislike over being sidelined, or political propaganda.

You take the making of the Proton car as an example of how two views can prevail. One man can praise Dr Mahathir for having the vision and courage to come up with a national car and another can criticise him for placing the consumer in a captive market and out-pricing foreign cars to protect the Proton; one man can applaud him for bringing pride to the nation through the making of our own car and another can chastise him for making it difficult to own the car he likes due to high import duties. You argue that the consumers' interest is not being served.

Dr Mahathir recently lamented the deteriorating relations among the races, particularly students. You say, he should take a hard look at government policy for this state of affairs. You also say that it is only during the last 10 years or so - during his stewardship - that religious extremism has become a problem in the country.

No, don't worry. I won't consider you as being anti-Dr Mahathir or anti-Government if you point out such things. I believe healthy debates result in a good balance within the individual and society.

One of the greatest mistakes people make is associating criticism with the person and not the action. For me, it is simple: I criticise an action, not the person. Each of us is a complex of the good and the bad, with the good generally predominating.

Internationally, we are touted as a model multi-racial nation. But there is this nagging worry amongst Malaysians that the fabric is rather tenuous.

Unity is strength, no matter how you look at it. Whether we like it or not, Malaysia is made up of Malays, Chinese, Indians and others and we must learn to live with each other in amity. The Government has urged university students to set up multi-racial clubs as one way of tackling the deepening racial and religious divide on campus.

I recall your cousin Gowri having problems with her roommates at the Universiti Science Malaysia hostel three years ago. They objected to her keeping any pictures or symbols of Hinduism in the room. It is sad when university students have closed minds. This would have been an excellent opportunity to learn about another religion.

You say the Government and administrators have contributed to the problem of racial polarisation. The fact that we have political parties along racial lines is a contributing factor, you add. Perhaps you are right.

But no one can deny that all Malaysians, including the Government, want to see peace and prosperity prevail.

God bless you,

APPA

* The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and will to carry on. - Walter J. Lippmann