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Bar Council should know better

By Kalimullah Hassan

YANG Pei Keng was upset that the Subang Jaya Municipal Council (MPSJ) issued a guideline asking those applying for dog licences to get the prior consent of their neighbours.

It does seem pretty odd that the MPSJ did not think this through before issuing the guidelines. But in any event, the MPSJ eventually did not implement these guidelines, ostensibly after adverse comments from the public.

Yang is correct when he questions why the MPSJ should discriminate against those who have dogs.

To some of us, the neighbour's dog may be a welcome presence, for a warning bark at night may alert us and keep the intruders away.

However, the dog may sometimes not be man's best friend, especially if the canine's incessant barking keeps us awake at night.

But on the rare occasion, when the hound is allowed to roam at will and snaps at the heels of all and sundry, there are avenues to complain and we can expect the authorities to take action.

So, there is no issue here. Yang Pei Keng is not wrong at all when he speaks of his rights and the MPSJ erred to even think about those guidelines.

But then Yang writes to the Bar Council's Infoline May/June 2004 issue and uses the analogy of mosques being built in predominantly non-Muslim communities and says that "while one recognises that any community's right to perform its religious obligation by way of using a loudspeaker, to some, it is noise pollution created to the annoyance of those residing in the neighbourhood."

"Following the argument of the local authority, prior consent ought to have been obtained from the local residents before permitting any developer to put up any mosque in their neighbourhood. However, this has never been an issue so far, simply because the non-Muslim community recognises the Muslim community's right to freedom of religion."

It was not a very clever analogy, to put it politely. Yang could have put his point across in so many other ways without hurting anybody's feelings. As a lawyer, Yang could certainly have found other parallels but instead chose something that he should have known could be misread and create controversy.

Over the years, Malaysians of all races and religions have learnt to live quite comfortably with each other. They have mastered the skill of not hurting one another's feelings on subjects such as race and religion and that is why, compared to other countries in the world which have the kind of religious and racial mix we have, Malaysia has probably the best record for harmonious inter-ethnic, inter-religious relations.

Malaysia is not perfect, certainly, but it is closer to perfection than any other country I know.

Once, a few years ago, one opposition Member of Parliament harangued the Government, asking it to emulate India, the world's most populous democracy, by being more open in debate on such sensitive issues.

When the Government MP asked whether the Opposition was willing to risk having the kind of religious and ethnic bloodletting India goes through periodically, where Harijan families are wiped out, where Harijan women are raped in front of whole villages, where Muslims and Hindus get into acts of barbarity and killings, there was no answer.

It's the same in Ireland, Rwanda, in Hitler's Germany, in the United States and Britain where there are periodical hate crimes targeting Muslims, Asians, Jews and Blacks. Who can forget the anti-Asian, anti-Chinese hate wave in Australia in the Pauline Hanson days not so long ago.

In Malaysia, despite the diversity, we have survived as a people, as a nation and done well.

After 47 years of Independence, we have to be thankful that we have done the right thing.

As much as the Government has done a lot to perpetuate harmony, without the Malaysian people being sensitive, tolerant, peace loving and moderate, the country could never have achieved what it has achieved.

What Yang Pei Keng said made some people angry, judging by their comments and reactions against the Bar Council for allowing the letter to be published in that form and using that analogy.

Bar Council chairman Kuthubul Zaman Bukhari's response was that he was surprised "that an article written by one member of the Bar and published in Infoline (a publication of the Bar) has attracted some excitement in certain quarters".

Haji Kuthubul Zaman Bukhari is surprised? Why should he be surprised.?

The Bar Council chairman must first realise that the letter has not attracted "excitement". It has attracted anger. Maybe then he will not be surprised.

Khutubul Zaman has also said that the writer was expressing his personal opinion and did not reflect the council's views. Fine, accepted.

We all know that unlike Yang Pei Keng, the majority of Malaysians, of all races and religions, would never have put such views in writing on a platform accessible to the public.

Does not the Bar Council have a responsibility to Malaysia to ensure that such analogy as used by Yang does not get an airing, especially in its own publication?

If the council had only been a little more careful, then this issue would not have erupted.

Therefore, Kuthubul Zaman should not act surprised when people get angry.

There will be those who will say that religion and race should be debated openly and freely. How many of us will agree?

We have seen so many lessons around us all over the world and in our own country in May 1969 and at Kampung Medan just a few years ago.

Malaysia is lucky that we have more people like Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Tan Sri Tan Chee Khoon, Mahathir Mohamad, Lee Lam Thye, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the ordinary mortals like the friends we have of all races and religions who do not think like these so-called liberals.

There is racial and religious banter but we only indulge in it with people we are familiar with. Are we not careful when in unfamiliar surroundings with unfamiliar people? And then when it is aired in a forum that the public has access to, Mr Kuthubul Zaman, the Bar Council chairman, says he is surprised at the reaction.

Where would it end, if, in a tit-for-tat reaction, those angered by such comments start talking about other ethnic groups and religious ceremonies and rituals that cause traffic jams, noise pollution, air pollution etc, etc, etc.

Race and religion are not subjects that the majority of people can have a no-holds-barred rational discussion on. Maybe in an ideal world it would be possible.

But the sad truth, Mr Yang and Mr Kuthubul Zaman, is that we do not live in an ideal world.

Legendary tycoon

ON Tuesday night, bulge bracket investment bank UBS and the New Straits Times organised a dinner where leading Indonesian presidential candidate Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was the guest-of-honour.

Despite the short notice, the majority of Malaysia's top CEOs, analysts and academics shuffled programmes and came for the talk by Susilo.

Almost all the top big-cap Malaysian companies were represented, as was UBS' own top Asia managers who were in town for a investor conference.

But in the crowd, one small-sized man, politely bowing, shaking hands, speaking alternately in immaculate and eloquent English and Bahasa Malaysia, was quietly noticed by guests.

Robert Kuok, 81, one of the world's richest men, sat unobtrusively, paying rapt attention, shaking a familiar hand, greeting a familiar face, all the while displaying an amazing memory for names and faces.

As I observed him, it brought to mind an article I had read a long time ago about writer and BBC broadcast journalist Alistair Cooke, renowned for his "Letter from America" series.

I do not remember the exact details but if my memory serves me right, another journalist covering a major news-breaking event in outcast Cuba's capital city, Havana, wrote the article.

The world's top journalists had gathered there, each trying to get that piece of information that would give them the edge.

They all knew that Cooke was in town because they listened to his broadcasts and they knew he was in the same hotel, but none had seen him.

Yet, there were his authoritative reports that they had to listen to find out what they had missed.

One evening, Cooke walked into the bar and there were hushed whispers all around until he smiled and said: "Can I buy you a drink?"

Almost everyone rushed to shake his hand and buy him that drink because in the eyes of even the most seasoned and most well-known journalist present that night, Cooke was a legend among legends.

And that was how it was with Robert Kuok.

Of all the top CEOs, tycoons and powerful people in that room on that night, the unassuming, smiling Robert Kuok was the Alistair Cooke of the night.

Perhaps, one of the best tributes to Robert Kuok's character was an article in Time magazine, outlining the reasons for this Malaysian's success.

Time wrote: "Asia's Governments have long memories, and Kuok figures in a lot of good ones."

Indeed, besides being a good friend of China and Hong Kong where he mainly resides, Robert Kuok has been a great friend to his country, Malaysia, and to many other countries in the region.

Maybe one day, his story will be told.

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