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Of criminals, Datuks and catfish

A Kadir Jasin

IT WAS not a pleasant coincidence that three death row inmates hanged at the Kajang Prison at the end of last month were once employed in the law-and-order profession - as a policeman, military commando and security guard respectively.

The commando was sentenced to death for killing a policeman, the policeman for drug trafficking and the security guard for killing three people - including two children - he was assigned to guard.

But it cannot be a sheer coincidence that an increasing number of ex-policemen and soldiers are involved in criminal activities. Something must be seriously wrong with the institutions they had served and the society they are supposed to protect.

Some are involved in criminal activities while still in service. The majority, however, turn bad after being discharged - some dishonourably. Many who would later become involved in criminal activities had indeed been dishonourably discharged.

With most discharged soldiers being in their thirties and forties, greater efforts must be made to ensure that their services to the country are recognised and they are not left jobless.

It has to be acknowledged that the pre-retirement training which every retiring soldier is entitled to has to be regularly evaluated and modified to ensure that it is useful in helping him secure a job in the ever-changing market environment.

It is downright pathetic to see a once proud soldier or policeman being employed as a security guard with shabby uniform and even shabbier work conditions - not to mention the meagre salary.

One only has to have a brief chat with them to realise just how difficult it is for them to make ends meet on their gratuity, pension and post-retirement jobs.

While the majority of them eventually adjust to civilian life and live as useful members of society, a fraction become disgruntled and resort to anti-social activities ranging from drug addiction to serious crimes.

And when an able-bodied person with considerable knowledge of firearms and survival tactics chooses the life of crime, the effects on society are deadly.

Thus, the Government and the people must not only be appreciative of the contributions of our soldiers and policemen, but, more importantly, they must also make sure that these people retain their dignity and decent standard of living when they retire.

The military and police top brass must continue to make sure that their men maintain the highest level of discipline, professionalism and incorruptibility. It is a crime for them to unleash their indisciplined, unprofessional and corrupt members on society by taking the easy way out by dishonourably discharging them.

POLYGAMY POW-WOW

AFTER months of a US-led assault on most things Islamic to justify its war on terror, it is refreshing to note that some Muslims in Malaysia are making efforts to reacquire the agenda, so to speak.

But their choice of issues leaves much to be desired. Thus, Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim's statement that Muslim men in his state could marry a second wife without the consent of the first has done more damage than good to Islam.

The subject, as expected, sent Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil through the roof and into orbit.

Alas, Malaysian Muslims are not short of issues to disagree and debase the religion!

Only Shahidan can come out in the open with such a sensitive matter and still get away with it. And only Malaysian Muslims, it seems, are preoccupied with this age-old issue.

Not even the war on terror, the suffering of fellow Muslims around the world and the moribund global economy could overtake the polygamy debate.

Unfortunately, those who are most ferociously involved in the debate know little or nothing at all about what polygamy (in the Islamic context) is in flesh and blood. This is why their arguments are often emotional and flawed.

Far too many people are pontificating when they should be practising what they preach either for or against polygamy.

At the very least, they should allow Muslims the choice of practising or not practising polygamy. Not every Muslim man is an irresponsible husband. Not every Muslim man has the desire and the courage to practise polygamy. Not every polygamous Muslim man is a rogue, and not every monogamous man and woman is truthful to his and her spouse.

Thus, this humble scribe, at the risk of being offensive and being accused of lampooning the issue, would like to suggest that those who feel so passionately about the issue, men and women alike, put themselves in the situation they seem to know so much about.

Thus, Shahidan should not bother seeking the consent of his wife to take a second wife, and Shahrizat should not object if her husband wants to acquire a second wife.

That done, the Muslims of Malaysia can move on to more important things like improving their education standards, raising their economic status and defending fellow Muslims against oppression.

EXCUSE ME, ARE YOU A DATUK?

THEN, there is the Malaysian penchant for creating awards and titles. There seems to be awards and titles for literally every profession, occasion and celebration. But there is nothing to beat the royal awards and titles. While the purpose is noble, the way they are given out is in danger of rendering them common and sundry.

Last year alone, the King, the nine state rulers and four governors bestowed the title 'Datuk', 'Dato' and 'Datu' (generally referred to in the newspapers as 'Datuk') to more than 600 people.

Pahang topped the list with 142, followed by the tiny (no pun intended) Melaka with 72, beating even the King who awarded only 54 such titles. I am not sure if Melaka is trying to use the award to relive the bygone days of the Malacca Empire.

The states that were sparing in awarding the title were Johor (two), Sarawak (11), Perlis (12), Terengganu (23) and Kelantan (25).

This is not to count the datukship awarded by a handful of stateless 'Sultans' from a neighbouring country and those issued by the calling card and rubber stamp makers. For a few ringgit more, one can have his calling card and company stamp adorned with the title 'Datuk'.

With so many Datuks around, it is safer to refer to everyone you meet as Datuk. If you don't, you might offend the Datuk. But if you do, then you make everybody happy. It also makes life easier because you don't have to strain your brain trying to remember everyone's name. Just call them Datuk.

I picked up this trick from the Chinese shopkeepers. When the teachers received hefty salary increases with the implementation of the Aziz Commission Report in the early seventies, they were so highly respected

that whoever spent more than average was called `Cikgu' (teacher) by the shopkeepers.

So, today, whoever carries a cellular telephone, uses a credit card, drives a flashy car and smokes a cigar is a `Datuk'.

And the datukship became a joke when known criminals and shady characters were bestowed the title by some state rulers and governors.

Thus, it came as no surprise when a man, who was stripped of his datukship by the Sultan of Selangor a couple of months ago for `behaviour unbecoming of a Datuk', was shot dead in a gangland-styled killing in Kuala Lumpur two weeks ago.

With so many Datuks running around for mere attention or for Government contracts and exclusive club memberships, it is no wonder that the Press is having a field day implicating them with everything from having an affair with a movie starlet to being caught for khalwat (close proximity), possessing stolen cars, not paying import duties on second-hand European automobiles and getting drunk in public places.

Actually, if you treasure your reputation and respect the spirit upon which royal titles are based, being a Datuk (and to a lesser degree `Datuk Seri' and `Tan Sri') is a curse.

Thus, it is time to go back to the spirit and history of the royal awards. To begin with, they should be given out more sparingly and only to the people who have served the country and the King well.

The royal titles are rooted in the earliest history of the Malay royalty - some say in the covenant agreed upon between Sang Sapurba and Demang Lebar Daun.

In the early days of the Malay kingdom, royal titles were bestowed upon wise and brave people with whom the rulers shared the task of ruling the empire. They were not given out to all and sundry simply because the rulers liked the look of their faces or because they were rich traders, horse owners and court jesters.

#### A CASE OF SELF-INTEREST, PLAIN AND SIMPLE

WHETHER it is about the Taliban, the terrorists or the catfish, the Americans, it seems, are yet to get their act together.

While President George W Bush's war on terror has its basis and is being supported by most nations around the world, its success in the long run depends on whether the US is willing to face up to reality.

And the reality is, the US was responsible for giving birth to the Taliban and for transforming many other fringe militant groups into potent fighting forces capable of doing its bidding - like defeating the Russians in Afghanistan - and also turning against it with deadly force.

The suicide attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington DC on Sept 11, 2001 were committed by the same band of people who had collaborated with the US in Afghanistan.

A full year before the tragic event, American Broadcasting Corporation correspondent John K Cooley had published a book entitled Unholy Wars - Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism in which he outlined the US's involvement in militant Muslim organisations from North Africa all the way to China.

He noted: `In 1989, (now) under the American presidency of George Bush (1989-93), the CIA celebrated its victory (against Russia in Afghanistan) with champagne. Nevertheless, the holy alliance of the Americans and the Islamist forces against the Russians had ended in a series of distinctly unholy wars and epidemics of violence, affecting much more than the ex-Soviet Union.'

A full decade later, Osama bin Laden, who was the senior Bush ally-turned-enemy, has come back to haunt the junior Bush - very much like what the Vietnamese catfish farmers are doing to their American rivals.

The Vietnamese catfish breeders are so successful in penetrating the US market that the American catfish farmers are crying foul. Unable to compete with the cheaper Vietnamese catfish - in this case Patin or pangasius sutchi scientifically - the American farmers lobbied the US Congress to pass a law restricting the use of the word 'catfish' to only the American varieties.

So much for globalisation and an even-playing field. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was right all along when he said that the level-playing field was good only if it benefited the US.

Now, to justify its talk of war against Iraq, the US wants to bring democracy to the whole of the Arab World, not because the US wants the people of the region to enjoy freedom, but because an increasing number of nations in the area are becoming less dependable as allies.

Cooley concluded: 'Perhaps future governments, whether in the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia or less powerful and influential nations, will take to heart this important lesson of the late 20th Century: When you decide to go to war against your main enemy, take a good look at the people behind you whom you choose as your friends, allies or mercenary fighters. Look well to see whether these allies already have unsheathed their knives - and are pointing them at your own back.'

DO AS YOU SAY

FINALLY, as for ministers threatening to resign or submitting undated resignation letters, I say, as I have said many times before in the past, 'Jangan cakap tak serupa bikin'.

And since this Bahasa Malaysia expression is so well-known and understood, there is no need for me to translate it into English, Chinese, Tamil, Arabic or Swahili.

In whatever language, it means don't fool around with the people, particularly when the general election is looming and the transition from Dr Mahathir to his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, has been set in motion.

E-mail: [akadirjasin@beritapub.com.my](mailto:akadirjasin@beritapub.com.my)

Besides 'Malaysian Business', Kadir also contributes to local Bahasa Malaysia and English newspapers. These articles can be accessed at [www.beritapublishing.com.my](http://www.beritapublishing.com.my) under the heading 'In My Own Write'.