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Dress code controversy reflects religious bigotry and lack of tolerance

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FOR whom the bell tolls should be of the essence. After all, the saying emphasises the fact that civilisation is a collective effort and the loss of the most insignificant life is a loss to all. Lest the citizens forget, a Malaysian civilisation can only be realised on this premise.

When the nation broke free from the shackles of colonialism, her leaders agreed to embrace and become a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual entity.

By and large, then Malaya and presentday Malaysia has plodded forward on these principles - though hiccups, both major and minor, had occurred and will recur.

However, much as there have been hiccups, it would be fair to say that the leaders of the nation had never attempted to divert from the principles outlined by the founding fathers of independence. And these principles have ensured that the citizens do not over-indulge in their singularity of faith or race to the extent of imposing their will upon others.

If history is of consequence, when the nation was struggling to find its footing, the biggest obstacle was to overcome the racial barrier.

There was too much suspicion in the early days apart from parochial and chauvinistic sentiments which kept the different races apart.

These suspicions and discomforts culminated in the May 13, 1969 tragedy. The nation's leaders decided to deal with these sentiments head on and came up with numerous national policies - from language to culture and economics.

In short, the leaders of the different races agreed then on very basic principles which had already been enshrined in the Constitution but not well emphasised. Basically, the nation would progress on its multi-cultural, multi-religious and multilingual entity without being hindered and the national identity would be based on the Malay majority while each race would have the right to pursue its own respective identity.

If post-1969 and the decade after that was a matter of getting over the racial barriers and bridging the differences, the 1980s, 1990s and the new millennium saw the rise of religious intolerance.

First it was confined within the Malay Muslim community in which, the "enlightened" ones attempted to impose their religious awareness on others from the community.

In many ways, it changed the Malay Muslim political landscape in which leaders with strong Islamic credentials were preferred over those committed to Malay nationalism. If post-1969 saw Malay nationalist politicians holding court, those with Islamic credentials seemed to be taking more control of the rostrum since the 1980s and this continued until today.

Even though this phenomenon has yet to take control of the nation, the wave has been steadily growing in magnitude that there is fear that Umno, which represents one side of the divide, in efforts to remain relevant to the Malay Muslim community, is pushed to emulate or indulge in religious upmanship to ensure it is not outdone by Pas.

In fact, some of the weaker Umno leaders who fell prey to the development came up with policies and views which were similar, if not more pronounced, than that of Pas.

Down the line, with some leaders weakening, civil servants and

administrators reacted to the situation in the simplest way - if you can't beat them, join them.

These civil servants and administrators need not necessarily be religious bigots or fanatics but they, too, live by what is determined by their surroundings. While this group is not difficult to deal with, provided the powers-that-be are firm and capable of convincing them on the need to observe national policies, there is another category which can do untold damage to the country.

These are religious bigots, with positions within the existing system, who believe that it is their responsibility to push the agenda of Islam according to the interpretation of their political leaders.

There are numerous reports of these individuals "abusing" their positions to promote their beliefs. It is no generalisation as such "incidents", not necessarily highlighted, have occurred in several government agencies and departments.

The worst are always the schools and educational institutes where teachers and lecturers decide on their own to impose rules which they deem to be "Islamic" though running contrary to national policies.

The vulnerability of schoolchildren in the hands of these bigots had resulted in many non-Muslim parents sending their children to vernacular schools, thus creating another divide.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had raised the matter on numerous occasions, remarking that some teachers of national schools had turned them into religious schools, ignoring the fact that these schools are supposed to cater for multiracial students.

But how much of his views are taken seriously by the Education Ministry or teachers is anyone's guess. However, based on the number of cases that have emerged, obviously many chose to ignore or have remained obstinate.

The recent issue involving Ungku Omar Polytechnic in which its convocation dress code caused concern among many nonMalays need not necessarily involve religious bigots.

The administrators of the polytechnic had issued a notice that it was compulsory for all male graduands to wear baju Melayu or a dark suit with a songkok while their female counterparts must wear baju kurung or kebarung with the tudung (female Muslim headgear).

The polytechnic administrators had, since the matter was highlighted and questioned by Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, retracted the notice and allowed its female graduands to opt to wear the tudung or otherwise on convocation day next month. A director of the polytechnic said the imposition of the tudung had nothing to do with religion.

His contention should be accepted in good faith though the whole episode lacked wisdom.

The polytechnic administrators should realise that imposing the wearing of the tudung is definitely viewed as a religious statement apart from being a political tool by certain groups to publicise their religious credentials.

For as long as the tudung is used as such and its wearing is imposed, it will remain and continue to attract controversy as it shows a lack of tolerance and bigotry. Only petty and narrow-minded people are inflexible in their judgments. There is a saying for this - a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.