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'Emperor Syndrome' mindset can impede intellectual growth

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DESPITE the trappings of ultra-modernity - smart buildings like Kuala Lumpur International Airport, the cutting-edge Express Rail Link and the state-of-the-art MyKad - the mindset of some Malaysians remain depressingly feudal.

Those badly afflicted suffer from what I call the "Emperor Syndrome".

Characterised by undue deference, at times bordering on servility towards top policymakers, the Emperor Syndrome is more than an irritating social phenomenon.

At its worst, it could impede this country's development.

One superficial manifestation of the Emperor Syndrome is our overwhelming obsession with titles, whether Malaysian or foreign, and regardless of whether the jurisdiction of the sovereign granting the title extends beyond the portals of his house.

More deleterious is the unhappy tendency of bureaucrats and individuals to take action only when directed by persons in authority. In other words, nothing moves without the go-ahead by the Number One.

But what's wrong with that? Isn't it the duty of a leader to make decisions and issue directives, some may argue. This point is conceded.

However, the notion that even minor decisions require the attention of someone like the prime minister is, I strongly believe, archaic.

A case in point is the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). On March 31, Singapore announced two people had died and 91 were infected, while the comparable figures for Hong Kong were 13 deaths and 530 persons infected.

Despite this announcement, Malaysian health authorities continued to maintain we were SARS-free - even though thousands of Malaysians cross the Causeway to Singapore every day and a significant number travel frequently to Hong Kong.

Since our SARS record was whiter than white, there was clearly little need for preventive measures.

Only after acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stated publicly the Government's commitment to transparency in the SARS issue and reiterated no cover-up would be tolerated did the floodgate of information open.

On April 4, The Star reported 70 suspected SARS cases while 14 people were quarantined.

What this sequence of events suggests is that if the acting Prime Minister had been less insistent on transparency, information on the number of SARS cases may have trickled out slowly, if at all.

Unfortunately, the mishandling of the SARS issue appears to be the norm rather than the exception. Several incidents underscore the pervasiveness of the Emperor Syndrome in this country.

In early March, the police raided Palm Court condominium and detained 191 people, including 186 Indian nationals who were mostly IT specialists.

Claims by the Indians that they were handcuffed, kicked and punched while the work permits in their passports were defaced provoked strong protest from New Delhi.

Again, Abdullah had to step in to forestall a breach in diplomatic relations.

Both the Home Ministry and the Foreign Ministry apologised for this incident. A police investigation revealed a failure to adhere to

operational procedures, while the Immigration Department offered to restore the Indian nationals' defaced work permits in their passports.

Yet another incident involved Aida Melly's seven-year struggle for a divorce. Only after the Sultan of Selangor expressed concern over the extraordinary delay did the Syariah Court grant Aida Melly a divorce.

Earlier, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's outrage over developers stripping bare a hill slope in Hulu Kelang, Ampang, and his anger at the dirty state of Jalan Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur prompted the authorities to take remedial action.

Some would say these incidents show the responsiveness of civil servants. I would argue otherwise.

In each instance, although the appropriate authority had the power to act, it either failed to do so or was singularly dilatory in its decision-making.

That each instance required top-level intervention is astonishing. It also underlines my belief that a concerted effort should be made to curtail the spread of the Emperor Syndrome.

There are several reasons for my belief.

First, the Emperor Syndrome lays an unrealistically high burden on the top leader. No one person can realistically be expected to be familiar with every issue and provide solution for all problems.

Conversely, the Emperor Syndrome encourages bureaucrats to adopt a laid-back attitude towards decision-making.

Second, by focusing on an individual leader, little importance will be placed on nurturing a system of due process in decision-making.

Instead of ensuring the decision-making process is quick, transparent and fair, the Emperor Syndrome encourages individuals to ignore due process and appeal directly to the highest authority.

The result is all too predictable. Decision-making will depend less on what you know and more on whom you know.

Given the fact that an individual in authority can determine the outcome of an issue, one by-product of the Emperor Syndrome is corruption and money politics.

Third, in today's fast-changing world, a quick decision-making process and flexibility are desirable attributes.

Under the Emperor Syndrome, both attributes could wither because every decision, no matter how trivial, has to be made by the prime minister or Menteri Besar and a decision, once made, even if misguided, could take an equally long time to amend or reverse.

Fourth, if the Emperor Syndrome continues to spread, this could inhibit the nurturing of an environment of intellectual creativity bordering on anarchy.

Since the advancement of knowledge requires individuals willing to challenge existing norms, docility could relegate this country to intellectual stagnation and impede our shift towards a knowledge-based economy.

Finally, an environment that allows the Emperor Syndrome to flourish speaks volumes for Malaysian societal values.

As a country, which value do we place a premium on - unthinking compliance or challenging creativity?

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