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Ludicrous sideshow carries a more sinister, dangerous element

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JOKES aside, how does one explain to family and friends about getting an instant military rank of brigadier-general, colonel, major, lieutenant or captain?

Surely, you cannot confess that you purchased a military rank for about RM25,000 and then command respect. Neither can you tell them that you earned it overnight.

Worse still, as role models, what inspirational or motivational stories will you tell your children about the immoral shortcuts in getting these titles?

Children need to grow up trusting the existing institutions - not with jaundiced values that money can buy anything!

Absurd as the flurry of stories may seem, they are true. About 8,000 of our fellow citizens paid a total sum of RM64 million for bogus military ranks and titles.

We do not know how many more have fallen for this masquerade, but are not registered members, of the Federal Special Forces of Malaysia (FSFM).

Call this group anything you want - a clandestine movement, a paramilitary conspiracy, a secret society, or an alternative government.

Or like our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, a group of crazy people who want to topple the Government by setting up their own special forces.

The glaring fact is that, this group is illegal.

The mastermind of this group is a "four-star general", Nor Azami Ahmad Ghazali, who has conned thousands including consultants, businessmen, a director at the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry, police and military officers, teachers and even a professor.

Maybe, they knew it was a bogus outfit but did not really care? Or maybe they actually believed that they had joined a bona fide security or civil defence organisation with links to the Government?

The gullibility of this educated group is almost scary. A FSFM leader claiming to be a brigadier-general met Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim a day before the illegal group was uncovered. Either he was so bold or was led to believe that he was doing the right thing.

Nor Azami has convinced himself and the others that he is to be the sixth Prime Minister after Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, claiming that he is in the so-called "Rahman" formula.

Buying ranks is not legitimate. And if people claim that they were cheated in the process of buying these titles, then they are partners in crime as well - not victims.

They have showed disrespect for our real military heroes who have earned their titles. To become a military veteran, there is a history of sacrifices, achievements and merit involved. How demoralising it is for our genuine servicemen.

Even if these victims were oblivious to the illegality of this whole sham, they would surely be wary of belonging to a group that hoards weapons including pistols, assortments of sharp weapons, dark blue uniforms and Opposition flags. And why handcuffs? Surely, that does not seem right.

Whatever you call them, they had existed for the last five years, during a time when the whole world was jittery, and were on the lookout for terrorists, secret societies, and deviant groups.

Yes they existed, in broad daylight networking from Perlis to Johor.

Who wouldn't be convinced when the ceremony was held at a hotel owned by the police co-operative and all the FSFM leaders were in full uniforms at the hotel? asks deputy chief police officer Deputy Commissioner Datuk Ahmad Bahrin Idrus.

Logos of the Prime Minister's Department and Malaysian Government were also found on FSFM documents. They were handed uniforms, membership cards and "authority cards".

While we may want to dismiss this entire episode as a sideshow, we cannot discount the ubiquitous nature of scams the world over, now or in the past.

From the Tulip mania of the 17th century, to Ponzi schemes of the last century, to the Nigerian money laundry scams of the present cyber era, the public has always been taken for a ride.

The worst of such scams in recent history almost resulted in a civil war in Albania, where a get-rich-quick pyramid scheme collapsed.

Locally, too, many have lost money in fraudulent schemes like the PhD scam, magic stone scam, and the scam that promised to turn paper into US dollars.

Also, there is another, more sinister and dangerous, element in the FSFM episode. They were hoarding arms! Maybe they thought themselves as a patriot force. A militia, perhaps?

Which, unfortunately, only reminds me of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, where scores, including women and children, died. American military veteran Timothy McVeigh, when caught, demanded execution rather than reveal the full extent of his network.

Maybe all that is far-fetched. But, still, it is sad to learn that a group of educated Malaysians have so little trust in our democracy that they should believe that our leaders were chosen by some ludicrous "Rahman" formula.

Even sadder is the mindset that rank, titles, degrees, immunity from crime can be bought at a price.

While we are proud of the police for uncovering this scam and arresting almost all those involved in just a week, the fact that they existed for five years scares me.

What makes me shudder, is that if uniformed personnel stops us, how do we know that he is for real? How do we know that he did not buy his uniform from the FSFM tailor?