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When leaders behave like juvenile delinquents

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THE report of the public flogging of a male and female student in Kelantan by two men who justified their act as being done in pursuance of the hudud is truly horrendous.

Doubly nauseating is the fact that these self-appointed guardians of morality who made a mockery of the religion are obviously ignorant about the tenets of Islam and the values it upholds.

The question is what went wrong and how can a religion whose laws are caring and forgiving to its believers and not meant to be punitive, be desecrated to such a level.

In fact, the incident is not the first in which Islam and its laws are interpreted wrongly whereby extreme actions were borne.

Take the bloody attacks on the Kerling temple and Batu Pahat police station in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Malay Muslim individuals who seemed to believe that their actions were in accordance with the Islamic teachings.

Comparatively, the floggings are nothing compared to the two attacks which led to several lives being lost.

But the essence of the actions is the same - there are individuals who attempt to attain spiritual enlightenment but have lost their bearings, ending up making Islam look bad.

At a time when the religion had taken a battering on the international front, Malaysia, which has been the model of moderate Islam for the rest of the world, will have her image tarnished by the incident.

It is when such things are least needed that they are bound to happen.

Said an observer: "It is very much like the saying that misfortunes come in droves while good luck trickles."

In short, it is when one is in the pits that everything bad emerges.

"Look at the MCA. That is what it is suffering from. As if the protracted leadership crisis is insufficient, accusations of leaders using triad members to intimidate their rivals have cropped up.

"And if that is still not enough, the issue of its Wanita chief (Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen) holding an Australian permanent resident status has also cropped up at the same time. Before long, the leadership crisis may be sidelined and the issue of triads and leaders having PR would become the focus," the observer added.

Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi did not mince his words when he directed MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik to resolve the party crisis immediately.

It is obvious that the crisis has reached a nonsensical level where something must give way.

A political analyst close to top BN leaders believes that the whole problem boils down to the leadership and the need to change it.

"The spirit of the Prime Minister's peace plan for the MCA, while suggesting the status quo in the party leadership from divisional level upwards be retained, was directed at a smooth transition in the party leadership.

"Maintaining the status quo in the last party election was aimed at reducing the temperature. The next step was for the top irreconcilable leaders - Dr Ling and his deputy (Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek) - to step down simultaneously and pass the baton to their proteges, vice-presidents Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and Datuk Chan Kong Choy respectively."

He said that was the only way the MCA crisis could be resolved.

"The MCA cannot have Dr Ling leaving and Lim staying. It will only shift the balance of power from Team A to Team B. In fact, Team A and Team B exist because the two cannot sit down together any more.

"If Dr Ling and Lim step down, the new leaders from both teams do not have such entrenched dislike for each other and can at least sit together and discuss in the interest of the party."

To the analyst, the way for the leadership transfer to be effected is by calling for an extraordinary general meeting.

"The party cannot wait much longer. If it hopes to settle its leadership crisis by the next scheduled party elections in 2005, the BN will enter the next general election, expected to be held latest by 2004, with a crippled partner which will not only be unable to contribute but also may even drag the whole coalition down."

BN secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat concurs.

"The MCA crisis cannot be pro-longed any further. Now with their leaders washing dirty linen in public, other BN components and even the general public are getting very uncomfortable.

"The MCA leadership needs to take drastic measures. Disciplinary action must be taken to put a stop to the rot."

In short, Mohamed seems to be a believer in the adage that sparing the rod will spoil the MCA further.

In the meantime, several quarters have questioned why Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad seems reluctant to accept Dr Ling's resignation as Transport Minister.

They believe if the resignation is accepted, then the process of Dr Ling stepping down as the MCA president will get into motion. An Umno divisional leader, however, pointed out that it was not that easy when it came to resignation from Cabinet posts by leaders of component parties.

"Even though it is the prerogative of the Prime Minister to determine his Cabinet, this prerogative is actually not absolute especially under BN's concept of power sharing.

"It is a tradition in which presidents of component parties are given a Cabinet post because they are accepted to be representing their party members who have elected them to be their leader.

"If the Prime Minister were to appoint a more junior leader from the component parties instead of the presidents, then members of the component party may feel that they had been snubbed."

His views were shared by an observer who said it was not only a case applicable to Dr Ling but had also been raised about other long-serving ministers from component parties such as the MIC and Gerakan.

"The most amicable way to remove Cabinet members from component parties should start from their parties themselves. In short, if the respective parties remove their presidents, then it is incumbent upon the Prime Minister to appoint new leaders to the Cabinet and not the other way round."

Many component party leaders feel the BN leadership must be prepared to bite the bullet and deal with the MCA problem swiftly and effectively.

"Some of the issues being argued between the two factions of the MCA are anything but enlightening. In fact, it had reached a level of being petty and very personal that one wonders whether they have any leadership quality, let alone be depended upon to lead the Chinese community," said an MCA member who is an aide to a prominent Chinese entrepreneur.

He said due to the squabbling and endless vitriolic exchanges, some in the Chinese community have started to turn to other Chinese groups, including those which are very critical of the Government.

"Is it then a surprise that associations such as the Dong Jiao Zhong,

Suqiu and other Chinese-based organisations have become the spokesmen for the community as the MCA has created the vacuum for them to fill up," he added.

What he had said is not far from the truth. Some of the MCA leaders have behaved like juvenile delinquents who had gotten out of hand.

To deal with them, the BN and MCA leadership will have to go back to the basics of how parents deal with naughty children. Caning, metaphorically speaking, may just be the remedy.