

Faking life in Malaysia
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Let's face it: Malaysia is a fake nation.

The ruling elites have been living in the delusion that they (or their forefathers) had won independence for the country "courageously" from the British; Sharizat Abdul Jalil earnestly believes her family did work hard enough to deserve the National Feedlot Corporation project without jeopardising the interests of the so-called bumiputera communities, and Mahathir Mohamad derides in all sincerity the 'minorities' for being over-demanding on their constitutional rights, conveniently overlooking the fact that he himself is of part-Indian origin pretending to be a true-blue Malay in order to compensate for his ethnic 'deficits'.

The ban on the Seksualiti Merdeka festival - scheduled to start earlier this week - is another sign of this fakery. The event was held without much controversy in the past two years, but it became a target this year simply because of one person: Ambiga Sreenevasan, who was supposed to officially open the festival.

The chairperson of the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections got the authorities and the police so riled up with the hugely successful Bersih 2.0 rally back in July that she has now become the enemy numero uno to the powers-that-be. Marina Mahathir, therefore, was right to challenge Ambiga's opponents to go after herself instead of a 'soft target'.

Driving a wedge between PAS and Bersih 2.0

Still, many have failed to see the political calculations on the part of the conservative forces within our society, choosing to focus on the 'morality' of the issue instead. The truth is: the entire event of Seksualiti Merdeka could have been carried out smoothly if not for the fact that questionable characters such as Ibrahim Ali, Muhyiddin Yassin and Mahathir had smelt blood and wanted to drive a wedge between PAS and Bersih 2.0.

Any sympathy expressed by other Pakatann Rakyat leaders - not least so Anwar Ibrahim - would also greatly delight those who were hungry for more gutter politics.

But it is the naivety of one Abdar Rahman Koya that beats us all. Ignorant of the political realities on the ground, the author goes on to launch a blanket attack on human rights advocacy as a product of a feeling of guilt of 'modern western civilisation'.

This is certainly new to me. A close friend of mine sacrificed all her material comfort in Portugal and now works among the suffering Palestinians in Gaza. Perhaps I should have asked if her empathy had been driven by an enormous sense of guilt over western colonialism and imperialism.

If anything, the author's long harangue only goes to show his deep-seated disdain for everything western while failing to manifest any human compassion for the sexual 'minorities', let alone offering a solution.

The immense indignation that the author presumably feels for the oppressed Palestinians is conspicuously absent when it comes to protecting the dignity of other marginalised groups. Small wonder that one conservative cleric after another has branded activists seeking to uplift the status of the

womenfolk in the Islamic world as either 'western stooges' or 'religious deviants'.

Seksualiti Merdeka has never been about promoting homosexuality per se. Rather, it has a broader and nobler agenda: to raise public awareness of the sexuality and the LGBT issues. To lump all these affected communities together and label them a 'minority' is also a misnomer, for there may be many of them living in the closet without the public's knowledge. Yet another evidence of our fakery, if you like.

And it is this very dishonesty that dominant religious forces - especially the Muslims who allow only their own version of Islam to be practised - want Malaysians to live. The mainstream religious traditions - be they Islam, Christianity or else - appear to differentiate between offences committed in the public domain and that which take place within the confines of privacy.

Hence, any act that is deemed 'irreligious', 'unIslamic' or 'unChristian' - while somewhat concealed and tolerated in the private sphere - would invariably result in reproach of the severest form if it is brought out in the open.

Living two lives

Believers are in a sense told to live two lives: one in the public domain and another in private. A Christian can watch porn on the Internet to his heart's content and continue to lead a 'pious' life in church, but anyone who professes in public his/her homosexuality would be fortunate to be told only to keep a low profile, sparing him/her the humiliating experience of seeking 'divine healing'.

In the same vein, a Muslim man may make all the dirty jokes in private but must maintain his piety in public. Because hypocrisy trumps integrity in our society, many a time we are confronted with the criticism of being more concerned with saving face rather than lives.

And it is this deceiving phantasm that breeds politicians like Chua Soi Lek, who had cheated on his wife and led a double life, but now finds the moral certitudes to advise that homosexuality is 'okay' as long as it is locked in the closet.

Still, the LGBT issues are vastly different from watching porn or sexism because they are about the inherent characteristics that make up one's being. It is about human life and dignity, just like the Palestinian issue.

Contrary to those who are deluded into thinking Seksualiti Merdeka had been wrong to bring in Ambiga, the entire episode has turned out to be a blessing. It has exposed the humbuggery of the religious and political establishments to the full, and forced the Malaysian populace to face up to an issue - a taboo even - that was long swept under the carpet.

The battle has just begun and there is a long journey ahead, but at least Malaysians are now being presented with an opportunity to learn once again how to handle public issues in a rational manner and to respect one another, in spite of our differences and the dodgy politicians.

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