

COMMENT | Malaysians, do we care?

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COMMENT | “There is no point talking about the importance of institutions, governance and especially human rights. People only care about bread-and-butter issues and not concepts that they do not understand!”

These are sentiments I hear so often. Largely by those in politics who believe that the way to the rakyat’s hearts is to deal with what is of immediate concern to them - namely bread-and-butter issues like the cost of living, wages and the like. Hence the focus (especially close to the possible 15th general election or GE15) is about giving them whatever eases their daily living, i.e. band-aid relief.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not against easing the burdens of the people at any time. But strong institutions, human rights and good governance matter if we are to progress as a nation and enhance the well-being of all in the long term.

Just take a look at the past year. The disastrous handling of the floods in December, last year, that resulted in the loss of homes and lives, was a result of

poor governance and institutional failure. So is the environmental degradation and indiscriminate deforestation that many believe exacerbated the floods and caused landslides.

Remember, remember

Political graphic artist and activist Fahmi Reza being hauled in numerous times, the investigation of those who hold candlelight vigils and other peaceful gatherings, all of these are the result of the erosion of our fundamental rights of free speech and assembly. Not to mention, in Fahmi's case, because our leaders do not understand satire!

In Kelantan, the destruction of Orang Asli ancestral land and the environment in Gua Musang to make way for a hydroelectric dam is also the result of institutional failure. The raiding of lands used by farmers for decades to plant their crops is an undermining of human rights and endangers food security.

But standing tall in our list of institutional failures is endemic corruption, crushing the very soul of the nation and making us so much less than what we ought to be.

Thus, the Federal Constitution, human rights, fundamental liberties and strong

institutions are not just for esoteric discussions.

They impact not just bread-and-butter issues but also our very lives and existence. We are a nation built on the rule of law with a system of governance that must accord with it. We must also have regard for our international obligations.

Who stands to gain?

Our institutions matter, and it is therefore incumbent on all of us to be vigilant in protecting and maintaining them. Strong institutions keep us safe. Their importance is all the more evident when they are compromised or undermined by those who are wrongfully seeking personal benefit and power.

In the last few weeks, we have seen a wrecking ball taken to two important institutions in this country. The judiciary (the third arm of government and the protector of the people) and the Securities Commission, that regulates and protects capital markets and investments in this country.

As someone who has lived through the 1988 judicial crisis and the assault on fundamental freedoms, I am genuinely fearful that we are being dragged back to those dark days.

Institutions are under attack just for carrying out their functions in accordance with the law. Other institutions seem to be aiding and abetting the wrongdoers.

A small merry band of marauders are pulling out all the stops because of the pressure of time. For some, it is jail time. For others, it is election time.

One only has to ask the question as to who benefits from these acts to know who is likely behind them.

'Stand up and be counted'

The tragedy of what is happening is that honest people who did their jobs are being put through a grinder for it. That too, by the people who don't know the meaning of the word honest.

If we allow the honest to be railroaded and bullied by the dishonest, what does that make us? Complicit? Can anyone then blame these upright individuals for never wanting to serve in public office?

What is perceptible is that, whilst in the past, there was always an attempt to disguise these nefarious activities, the current machinations are blatant. There is no attempt to disguise what they are doing.

They know that Malaysians are exhausted and perhaps even numb after the crises of Covid-19, the floods and the political trauma that have plagued us since GE14. They are counting on our silence.

When one speaks of institutions, I would include our international obligations, particularly as Malaysia sits on the Human Rights Council for the third time.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.” The uplifting of the weakest in society, uplifts the whole of society. They include the homeless, refugees, the LGBTQ, migrants and other communities. How we treat them reflects on us as a society.

Shockingly, despite our sitting on the Human Rights Council, our treatment of vulnerable communities is appalling and, in most instances, highly embarrassing. Malaysia must grow up and be counted in the international community by signing more international conventions and acting on them.

Change our future

Luckily, ordinary Malaysians have shown we are capable of great humanitarian efforts. In times of crisis, Malaysians rose to the occasion putting the authorities to shame. “Kita Jaga Kita” was a reality when Malaysians helped everyone in need

regardless of colour, creed or religion.

Pakatan Harapan had its flaws, and I called them out often when the coalition was in power (see [here](#) and [here](#) for examples). However, it is because of Harapan we have a courageous and honest chief justice and a strong judiciary today.

We had a strong Securities Commission. We also had many highly qualified, honest and competent people appointed to important positions, which included a record number of women. Many of them were removed when the Harapan government collapsed.

Are we ready to go back to the dark old days? I don't believe we are. We must, therefore, be vigilant in protecting our institutions. We must care. Don't forget, we brought change in 2018 when our institutions were compromised. We can do it again. We must all care enough to vote in the next election for a better nation.

Remember, every one of you over 18 is automatically registered to vote. All you have to do is to exercise that precious right.

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