

Reining in our stable of sultans
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The recent installation of the 13th Agong was certainly glittering. While all that glitters may not be gold, this particular event certainly sucks in a bundle of that precious metal. And Malaysia has an abundance of these royal extravaganzas. In its 50-year history, Malaysia has had more royal installations than general elections.

These elaborate royal rituals take their toll directly on the nation's treasury in terms of outlays and actual expenses, and indirectly through their impact on the nation's productivity. The latter is the more expensive and destructive burden.

At the most elementary (and readily comprehensible) level, you can bet that on the day of the installation, together with the preceding week of preparations and rehearsals as well as the few days following with the banquets and celebrations, ministers and senior civil servants would be consumed with the event. All meaningful works in the various ministries and departments would have come to a screeching halt. Not that much gets accomplished on any regular workday anyway.

At the abstract level, these sultans squat on the apex of the special privileges heap. Additionally for Malays, these sultans are more than the constitutional symbolic head of state; they are also the head of Islam, and Allah's representatives on earth. Why God would need such a representative escapes me. There are no such references in the Quran, and most Muslim countries have done away with their sultans.

Consequently these sultans have a disproportionate hold on Malays. Attempts at reforming the race, be they revolusi mental (mental revolution), Melayu Baru (New Malay), or Melayu Global (Global Malay) must therefore begin with the sultans. Similarly, any examination of the New Economic Policy, in particular its special privileges provisions, must begin with a critical review of the special position and privileges enjoyed by these sultans.

The burden of having sultans

Even the British with their greater affluence and more efficient economy are questioning the burden of having their Queen, and her relevance. For Malaysia, the burden would be tolerable and bearable if there is only one royal head. Unfortunately, we have a glut of sultans and sultan wannabes.

In addition to the king and nine state sultans, there are the four non-royal heads of state (the governors) who have equally grandiose royal pretensions and accompanying extravagant tastes. If that long list were not enough, we now have the latest addition – and by far the most expensive – in the person of pseudo sultan Prime Minister Abdullah.

Abdullah successfully fooled everyone (including former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad) with his carefully cultivated fraudulent image of humility, piety, and honesty. He refused to move into his relatively new official residence until it had undergone multi million-dollar renovations. Even President Bush did not need such lavish renovations before moving into the White House. Abdullah's current obsession is luxurious corporate jets. What's next?

It is amazing how this hitherto simple kampung imam has quickly degenerated and acquired such expensive tastes, all at the nation's expense. Equally amazing is how Malaysians have indulged him.

Of course, if the Prime Minister has a luxurious corporate jet at his disposal and multimillion-dollar renovations to his official residence, the King must have more. Thus the obscene race of exorbitant spending begins, with a new RM400-million palace being built, never mind that there is already one in Putrajaya as well as the perfectly adequate existing Istana Negara.

With a "monkey see, monkey do" mentality, when one sultan gets a new expensive toy, the others would soon want it too. Therein lies the expensive burden.

The toll of the sultan syndrome

As expensive as it is to maintain these sultans, governors, and the Prime Minister with their never-satisfied profligate tastes, the more destructive effect is the negative impact their wasteful ways have on the citizens.

Elsewhere I describe the corrosive consequences of the sultan syndrome, of ministers, departmental heads and senior officials aping the sultans and assuming a detached and imperious role instead of being an engaged executive. They preoccupy themselves with the trapping of their offices and are consumed with entertaining dignitaries or endless "do good" social activities while neglecting their primary responsibilities. They busy themselves planning Quran reading competitions or Merdeka Day celebrations while our rivers remain deadly polluted and universities continue their steep decline.

These mini pseudo sultans also engage in their own version of "royal visits." "Visit" is the appropriate word, for that is all they do. Do not expect them to be curious or ask probing questions of their subordinates. If those units happen to be located at desirable destinations like resort towns or shopping havens, those "official" visits are nothing more than a convenient cover for an all-expense paid personal trip.

I have met my share of senior Malaysian personnel on "official" visits to America. Most are more concerned with shopping or visiting their children in college.

The real royal visits are also disruptive to the normal workings of the visited department. About the only tangible benefit may be a fresh coat of paint for the visited premises. Meanwhile the costs mount, with the already stretched departmental budget being diverted to entertain the royal visitors and their inevitable huge entourage.

The new king seems aware of these wasteful practices. That is a good sign. He has mandated that palace affairs must start promptly and end by 10:30pm so as not to interfere with the next day's regular working schedule. That is a good step, although the impact would be more symbolic than real. The King would have much greater effect and at the same time incur considerable savings if he were to sharply reduce the long royal birthday honor lists.

His Majesty should also decline invitations to make royal visits to government departments. At least that would not disrupt the officials' work routine. He does not need these royal visits to know how those departments are doing, or more correctly, not doing. He does not have to visit the Ministry of the Environment to know that it is doing a lousy job. Just look at our rivers, or the drains outside the palace gate.

If the king were to fancy himself emulating the legendary Caliph Omar's style of wandering incognito around the marketplace in order to assess how the citizens are faring, he could have the same information logging anonymously onto the Internet and reading malaysiakini, Malaysia Today, and Ahiruddin Atan's blog. The king would get a far more accurate picture of his kingdom than from all those royal visits and briefings. If he is computer illiterate, do not despair. One of the palace official's teenage sons could have him be Internet-savvy within minutes.

The royal family beyond the palace

An unexamined issue is the increasingly common practice of having sultans and crown princes or their consorts chair the governing bodies of important institutions. Public universities invariably have sultans or sultanahs as chancellors.

While implying no disrespect, the presence of these royal figures hinders more than helps these institutions. Malaysians, even those highly educated, have yet to escape the clutch of our feudal traditions. Few would dare challenge the views of these royal chancellors. Consequently, discussions at these board meetings in the presence of these royal figures lack vigor, as participants become unduly deferential. Do not expect robust policy debates.

My observation also applies to the increasing participation of immediate members of the royal family in commerce. Any member of the royal family on the civil list, that is, getting an allowance from the state by virtue of their being a member of the royalty, would lose that allowance should they participate in commerce; likewise if they were employed. This would encourage them to donate their services and skills pro bono. As the public is already paying them through their royal allowances, their getting an additional public salary would be tantamount to "double dipping". It would be patently unfair.

If they were to be involved in business, an independent review body should scrutinize any government contract they receive to ensure that it had been awarded fairly.

If we do not have such strict guidelines, there is a danger that these sultans and their family members would assume the mentality of the Sultan of Brunei, of confusing the state treasury as their personal piggy bank.

The last time someone tried to rein in the excesses of the sultans, it precipitated a constitutional crisis. It took the courage of a Mahathir to take on the sultans. Today with a Prime Minister more enamored with getting royal awards and joining the sultans into their jet-set luxurious lifestyle at public expense, there is no one left to check the excesses of the royal class, the real as well the pretenders.

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