

Sexist MPs so ignorant of changes
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Jeffrey

I refer to the malaysiakini report Errant MPs apologise over sexist remarks.

Kinabatangan MP (Bung Mokhtar Radin) and Jasin MP (Mohd Said Yusof) are genuinely bewildered. They perceive themselves as among the more colourful characters in the Dewan Rakyat, often interspersing their speeches with jokes, anecdotes and jibes at the opposition that get media attention.

So when opposition MP (Fong Po Kuan) tried to raise a motion on the leaking ceiling near the media centre at the Parliament building, Bung Mokhtar (supported by Mohd Said), thought it witty to liven up parliamentary proceedings by the retort: 'Mana bocor? Batu Gajah pun bocor setiap bulan (Where is the leak? Batu Gajah [Fong] also 'leaks' monthly).'

To liken the perforation in the plumbing system of a building structure directly to the very femininely defined function of a woman's hormonal cycle with its periodic fruition might be just a harmless jest (without personal animosity) by Bung Mokhtar and Mohd Said and their many sympathisers amongst both male and female BN MPs in Parliament.

This is because, traditionally, the culture and mindsets have been and still are patriarchal which relegate women to an unequal and inferior position consistent with their being made a butt of male chauvinistic jokes. That this is not the preserve only of BN's politicians is testified by the fact that opposition MPs from PAS have been quite muted in their outrage at the duo's off-colour sexist remarks.

Both Kinabatangan and Jasin MPs would not apologise on their own accord (they did so today because they were probably compelled by Umno's top leadership) because they are genuinely not contrite. Though streetwise, these two 'offenders' of sexist remarks have failed to grasp the following changes and developments in Malaysian society:

* That large and significant sections of Malaysian public are now educated – Western educated, to be more precise – in which values inculcated include gender equality (enshrined by Article 8 of Federal Constitution), respect for women and not denigrating them by sexual-laced jokes. Whilst it is true that menstruation is a natural biological process, the fact that it is universally a closet subject and not openly discussed. It is a function which men like MPs of Kinabatangan and Jasin do not have to go through monthly but yet have the audacity and insensitivity to make fun of women's vulnerability, showing neither respect nor sensitivity.

* No issue galvanises and unites women as a group more. For the majority, gender issues are closer to heart than even national issues. (I can preempt that some will chide me for this 'sexist' remark). And women are a force because they make up 50 percent of the electorate, whose grievances, necessarily, the BN government cannot politically afford to ignore.

* The central issue in today's discourse arena in this multiracial and multicultural country is the fight for recognition of inalienable individual and minority rights and freedom from religious and racial discrimination. But as race and religion are sensitive issues around which protests against their encroachments have necessarily been less vociferous, gender issues occupy a different and more neutral space which is now conveniently seized upon as the rallying and focal point in the fight for a more developed rights recognition culture.

In short, it is an issue that even component parties within BN can safely fight for without being seen as being disloyal to the BN government. It is also truly astounding that after 50 years of independence, and billions of ringgit being spent on education, there are still so many people around who are oblivious of this imperative of fighting for and developing a culture of rights recognition (which is still nascent here).

* And this is a fight that is not so easily resisted by the government that commits itself to a rhetoric of developing human capital, a First World mentality and a world-class parliament. Surely one can't say you want a First World parliament and yet allow your MPs to joke about menstruation as part of appropriate parliamentary language?

The Kinabatangan and Jasin MPs are bewildered and caught in present predicament because they have not grasped the above stated undercurrents sweeping the social and cultural landscape of the land and their political implications. Let theirs be a lesson for the rest of the MPs to be more sensitive and politically correct in what they say unless they want to risk public wrath.

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