



**Racist speech: Where is Najib's zero tolerance?
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COMMENT Once again, the specter of racist taunts and epithets raises its ugly profile in Malaysian public life.

Really, it won't go away. Not unless certain reactions to those who commit these gaffes are institutionalised in our society.

Barely had the controversy over racist remarks made by schools principals in Johor and Kedah died down before the National Civics Bureau was exposed, earlier this week, as having a top-ranked defiler in its folds.

It is said a concerned cabinet has ordered an investigation, just as the education authorities did with regard to the school heads' offences against the proprieties when addressing pupils. In matters like these, investigations and inquiries can only be viewed as a search for euphemisms, for palliatives that do not cure the malady.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, vestigial keeper of Old World sagacity in Umno, is right: the only cure for racist remarks is zero tolerance.

He reminded us that in racially diverse societies there will always be emotional and irrational individuals who give vent to remarks that stoke racist sentiments. The public culture should regard these individuals as being out-of-order and banish them to the fringes.

Any temporising would only send the wrong signals, just as Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who holds the education portfolio, did when he said that the matter of disciplining the erring school principals was out of his hands.

Muhyiddin would have given his famously controversial 'I'm Malay first' profession immense prestige if he avowed that Malays are a polite people and on that score, should not tolerate racial crudities from their school principals.

His failure to do so only showed up his earlier profession to have been a play for partisan political advantage than anything nobler.

An opportunity for Muhyiddin

More is the pity that Muhyiddin did not see fit to step up to the plate. Had he, it would have been seen as he engaging in constructive and imaginative politics because the party he's fond of targeting these days, PKR, are now engrossed in a battle for the No 2 position in their hierarchy, among other posts up for grabs in their triennial polls.

Some years ago one of the expected contestants for the post uttered a racially derogatory term against a member of its policy-making body. As far as is known, he did not retract or apologise for the slur.

He is expected to accept nominations for the No 2 post. What signal would PKR be sending if its multi-racial membership elects to its No 2 position a candidate who has been a flagrant

infringer of racial punctilio?

That Muhyiddin did not see the chance for legitimate and creative one-upmanship against PKR in the matter of dealing with racist epithets shows that his feel for crude group-identity politics is stronger than any ability to transcend it, a requisite you may say of a deputy prime minister wishing to embellish his credentials for elevation.

The specter of racist taunts cannot be exorcised from the Malaysian body politic unless the reigning public ethos requires that the perpetrators are summarily disbarred. More than that, they should be considered disqualified for elevation to higher public office.

Random examples

Two random examples culled from the international scene would suffice to show the effectiveness of a ruling public ethos against exhibitions of prejudice of any kind that obliges perpetrators to quit.

Some years back, the president of Harvard University made some remarks about the inadequacy of math and hard sciences scores of women that were interpreted as views exhibiting gender bias. The blowback was so strong that an otherwise capable and reforming president was obliged to resign.

Likewise, when an England soccer manager made remarks to the effect that handicapped people suffer from bad karma, he too was forced to resign.

The posts of Harvard presidency and of England soccer supremo are prized niches in the galaxy of the achieving. That their occupants were obliged to quit when they displayed the merest prejudice conveys indelibly the owning culture's zero tolerance for the offence.

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