

What public-space morality really means
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KJ John

Disingenuous. That is the one word I can use to describe Khairy Jamaludin's article in the Sunday edition of the New StraitsTimes (NST).

It appears that the infamous KJ, the Umno Youth deputy chief, is again playing to the gallery of general public opinion, even as an apology remains conspicuous by its absence for the keris-waving antics and ketuanan Melayu rhetoric.

His treatise is an excellent one about dignity of every living person. But his new focus and issues appear, to me at least, disingenuous. Why do I say this?

He quotes Mohammad Hashim Kamali's treatise on 'Dignity from the Islamic perspective' (which I have yet to read) to support his case and argues that such a notion of dignity includes space for physical privacy and therefore "the peeping tom morality police will be violating this space".

Such privacy within any definition of dignity can never be limited to physical space privacy. Privacy, as defined by the UN doctrine on human rights, includes many other related freedoms which define the dignity of the human person, including all of the freedoms guaranteed in Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, and especially, the freedom of both conscience and the freedom of personal faith. I hope KJ is aware of where I am heading.

KJ was not the first to respond positively to the PM's unequivocal stand on the Mat Skoding (snoop squad) issue. Neither was it the first time the PM was making a clear statement on the issue of public space morality policing. He did it in relation to the alleged "holding hands" case at the KLCC park and proposals to create snoop squads in Putrajaya and Melaka to curb khalwat (close proximity among Muslims).

We must bear in mind that KJ only speaks very bravely after his father-in-law and Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has spoken.

Another NST columnist Johan Jaffar offered a similar argument last Saturday against such an applied value of the need for morality police or what he calls "the Arabisation of Islam" in Malaysia, with a simplistic focus on "dress and external behaviour as an indicator of religiosity". JJ has consistently and clearly argued for a universal moderate and tolerant Malay value system that Malaysia was famous for, but which we appear to be fast losing to zealots even with greater independence after 50 years.

The Sun, in its editorial on Feb 26, argued that "morality is a private matter". I could not agree more with it and JJ, but not just yet with KJ.

Contradictory practices

If Islam Hadhari of the PM's articulation is meant to be serious, it must focus on personal morality at both the public and private levels; of spirituality and not simply a kind of public religiosity visible only at the level of public space. Religiosity, whether of Islamic, Christian, Hindu or Buddhist origin, is only simply that: a superficial articulation of underlying faith, often

made visible through forms for public perception, and quite often, with a lot of misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

For instance, in any place of public worship in Malaysia, is it not a curious phenomenon that all of us 'very religious' people misbehave in the parking lots while dressed up to meet their Holy Other within the place of worship? We are kidding ourselves if we believe that the Other cannot see through us and our real intentions to quickly worship and run along to do the really more important things.

And, yet we are able to notice that another human being is breaking or violating the rules of conduct and therefore, feel qualified to peep on them. Come on! This too denies our God-given dignity, because God cannot be mocked! God is a fully Holy Other; regardless of our theologies!

Allow me to now address on a far more public space morality issues in Malaysia - bribery and corruption, which are now an endemic problem in Malaysia and "even happens on top of the counter", as former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad described it.

It makes me wonder why KJ has not made an issue of this topic to date. After all, this too is another favoured topic of his father-in-law, who has made it cornerstone of his Islam Hadhari agenda. To non-Muslims like myself, it will be in this arena that the largest and most solid message about Islam Hadhari will be judged and accepted as a public space applied value.

Yet, during the last Umno general assembly, where the keris was drawn and all kinds of racial threats were made, not a single soul made a serious comment about bribery and corruption. Maybe this is part of our 'close-one-eye' culture and the public theology on the matter.

KJ and Umno Youth cannot preach blood-letting and hatred for the views of others - whether on Article 11 or even Bangsa Malaysia issue - on the one hand, and then preach "human dignity as the ultimate value" on the other. This is one reason why I used the word 'disingenuous' to describe KJ's article.

I challenge him to repeat the thesis of his article and argument more fully at a forum of Mat Rempit, whom he has claimed to support. You see, their breaking the explicit law is far worse for public space morality than for a PAS-like Umno in Terengganu to implement its version of an Islamic state when it has no public and legal apparatus to do so.

It is illegal for the civilian police to enforce such 'Islamic laws' in Malaysia. What then is the difference between Mat Rempit and Mat Skoding? Both are illegal under our civil system of laws within a federally defined constitution and supreme rule of the civil law regime, except for personal and family matters related to Islamic law. This is where the threat issued by the Umno Youth chief on Article 11 sounds very hollow, given that he is a British-trained lawyer. So was his father, who would never do the same!

Real excellence

My studies on 'dignity in the workplace' tell me that an environmental culture of morality, dignity and destiny also defines and influences the public space available for the experience of dignity for every person. In my doctoral work I described this as "a culture of excellence".

What then is this culture of excellence? Malaysia cannot progress in the global arena without a real and operationalised culture of behavioural excellence. What does this mean? First and

foremost, merit must be recognised for what it is: good and high-quality performance based on a pre-defined set of criteria. When good performance is recognised and rewarded, then excellence will emerge. A culture of excellence creates an environment in which the good become better and the best will soon emerge in everyone, who wills to strive for excellence.

This was my experience in the Royal Military College (RMC) in the mid-1960s. There we were, ordinary boys from all corners of Malaysia (we even had three Singaporeans). There was Winston Pascal Simon, the best schoolboy athlete from Johor; Yoong Yin Fah the KL-ite from Methodist Boys School, whose father was a business tycoon; Khalid Kadir, the son of our famous two-minister family; and the unheard-of Negri Sembilan boy Rozali Wathoot, today a leading heart surgeon.

We came, we ran together and we always knew that unless one was the best, one could not get anywhere in the RMC. Is it then any wonder that Khalid took the Commandant's Prize as overall best student and leader; Winston took the Board of Governor's Prize and Lee Boon Leong from Melaka took the Board of Director's Prize for the best student? Did they each not go on to become excellent in their fields of practice?

That was the RMC then. Today, I believe that things are different. The best do not go there. Except for Khalid, I do think any of the others have sent their children to RMC. Why? Because there is no more the culture of excellence!

Today the best schools may be the Maktab Rendah Sains Mara for all round education, or even ordinary schools or private schools. The culture of ketuanan, which is destroying even the Armed Forces, has become manifest in extreme expressions of anger and even hatred, justified as 'ragging' in most of these schools.

Yet day schools offer similar quality of education without ragging and abuse. For example, both Rozali and I sent our sons to the Bukit Bintang Boys School, and they have excelled because of the quality of all-round education in the public school system. Who then needs the RMC?

Risk and reward

At the end of the day, a culture of excellence is not simply about having the best physical facilities in one place, but rather about a software of excellence (what I called the 'Theory R' in my last article) and with ample opportunities for both risk-taking and reward-sharing. If you kill and destroy risk-taking, there will be no earnestness in the ambition for the perceived rewards, even if dictated by others.

The Mat Skoding are motivated to enforce their espoused morality on others, but, I suggest we take a deep look at ourselves first. The Mat Rempit are keen to exert their care-free attitude on public roads, but that is against the law.

In every case, we need to nurture a way of growing up with enough room for experimentation without violating scriptural teachings or conscience, while abiding by the law. Without the rule of law we will have chaos; and without our Federal Constitution as the Social Contract; we will have animosity among the ethnic groups.

We have to respect the dignity of each life (and here, KJ, ketuanan Melayu is an oxymoron), but also respect the dignity of the Federal Constitution and our historically agreed common way of life as a multi-cultural community, without creating a neo-colonial tuan.

Since KJ is at least an acquaintance, if not a friend, I hope he will take a serious look at the integrity gap between his own core beliefs, his espoused theory and his theory-in-use.

Then we can seriously explore why the PM set up the National Integrity Institute and went on to appoint the first president as his point man for implementation of projects under the 9th Malaysia Plan - and had him upgraded in an unprecedented way to become the director-general of the Economic Planning Unit a few years after he retired.

My reading is that it is all about instilling integrity between our thoughts, words and deeds. That is what every religion teaches about the journey of the quality of spirituality required for a life of integrity.

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