

Pak Lah the 'practise' PM
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In his novel *Gadis Pantai* ("The Girl From The Coast"), Pramoedya Ananta Toer revealed a quaint custom in ancient Malay culture. MCPX

That is where the lord of the kampong upon reaching adulthood would grab the prettiest village virgin to be his "practise wife." Then when he becomes sufficiently well honed in his "husbandly" skills or when he gets bored with her, he would toss her out like a piece of soiled rag. He with his now enhanced skills would go on to marry a lady of "proper" background.

abdullah ahamd badawi police day 250308 01I believe that fate has gifted Malaysians with a "practise leader" in the person of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He is so inept, so spineless, and so lacking in ability to make decisions that he practically invites scorn and contempt.

Or in Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's words, Abdullah showed a "stunning ineptness in managing ... straightforward functions of government." Today, in the kedai kopi (coffeehouses) even taxi drivers are not hesitant in ridiculing Abdullah.

Granted, some of the criticisms leveled at Abdullah are crude and clumsy, but then so would the village nobleman's initial experiences with his "practise wife." The concern is less with finesse and artistry, more with getting it done. With time and practice, rest assured things would only get better.

Once Malaysians have become accustomed to being critical of Abdullah and are unafraid to criticise or even challenge him, then we would toss Abdullah out, as the village nobleman would of his "practise wife." Malaysians would then be ready for a proper leader.

Consequences of uncritical citizenry

Fate has blessed Malaysia with capable leaders in the past. There was Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Father of Independence, who successfully led us out of colonial rule without shedding a drop of blood. However, as Malaysians had not yet learned to be good followers, we were not sufficiently critical of him.

kain rentang keris umno 081007 tunkuThus he got carried away with being the "world's happiest prime minister" while letting problems fester away until they blew up in his and our collective faces.

He was succeeded by the able Tun Razak, but his life was tragically cut short by cancer. As such he was spared from being spoiled by an adoring and uncritical populace. His reputation remains intact and unblemished.

His successor Hussein Onn may not have been the most capable but at least he knew his limitations. He was wise enough to voluntarily relinquish his position. He also took his oath of office seriously. Thus he was meticulous and unusually astute in the choice of his successor.

mahathir khir toyo kmu forum 010408 06In Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysians had a leader of exceptional brilliance, unorthodox convictions, and courageous innovations. He transformed Malaysia. Like any other mortal, he too had his share of mistakes. Unfortunately his uncritical and unabashedly adoring followers were equally blind to his mistakes thus preventing him from recognising and rectifying them.

Had Malaysians generally and Umno members specifically been more critical of Mahathir in his choice of a successor for example, the nation would have been spared the current political muddle.

This uncritical and sheep-to-shepherd dynamics also characterise other Asian and Third World societies. Indonesia was blessed with the charismatic and brilliant Sukarno. He united those polyglot islands into a cohesive nation while bravely taking on the Dutch colonialists at the same time. China has its Mao. However, as their uncritical followers did not rein in their leaders' initial excesses, those leaders got carried away.

Making Malaysians more critical

Malaysians are excessively deferential to their leaders, rarely challenging or even criticising them. Our leaders are always clad in the finest fashion even when all they have on is a piece of tattered, stained loincloth. The relationship is akin to that of a flock of sheep and its shepherd, of blind obedience.

That may be fine for a flock of docile sheep but it is hardly the recipe for a progressive society. Nor is it the recipe for a competitive society, or at least one that would merit the adjective "modern." In such a society, leaders must be held accountable, and followers in turn must not hesitate to hold their leaders to exacting standards. This reciprocal relationship means that followers must be willing and not be fearful to criticise and challenge their leaders. That is the best way to ensure accountability. It would also discourage these leaders from being led astray by their blind ambition or abusing the trust we grant them.

Without being unduly Pollyannaish, the only way to make sense of the current political mess is to believe that this is part of a divine design, of fate providing Malaysians with a "practise leader" in order to better prepare us for a real leader in our future.

anwar ibrahim pc 180208 01There are two towering personalities in the horizon that fit my characterization of a real leader: Anwar Ibrahim and Tengku Razaleigh. In their previous incarnations, these two had their share of fawning followers who egged them on to make unwise decisions. For Anwar, it led to his imprudently challenging Mahathir. He (and us) knows only too well the disastrous consequences of that fateful decision. Tengku Razaleigh, again at the behest of his admiring supporters, left Umno briefly to form the Semangat Party.

Humility and magnanimity

The problem is not with Anwar or Ku Li challenging Mahathir, rather that we as a society have yet to deal with or learn the art of challenges and criticisms. Our standard response then was either to split the organisation or riot in the streets. Enter Abdullah as "practise leader;" now we have learned at least not to riot, a significant advancement.

I believe that Anwar and Ku Li are now wiser. They would be even better leaders if we let them be, meaning that we should not let our guards down lest they would be tempted to be led astray by their uncritical admirers.

tengku razaleigh interview 010806 serious
On the personal side, I note a certain humility and magnanimity in both Anwar and Ku Li. To them, the travails and weaknesses of Abdullah truly pain them. To these two nationalists, challenging Abdullah is not a route for the fulfillment of their personal ambition, rather a patriot's obligation.

To young readers who may not yet quite grasp the "practise wife" concept, let me substitute a sports metaphor. Abdullah is a convenient punching bag for Malaysians to practice on how we should learn to handle future leaders. For now, his ineptness and incompetence make those lessons easy for us, though not for Abdullah.

In Pram's novel, the young nameless lady who is the nobleman's "practise wife" returns to her village. Only through her strength of character could she maintain her dignity and respect in her village.

When Abdullah gets tossed out, as inevitably he would, lacking strength of character, the public scorn heaped upon him would be merciless. Abdullah's predictable humiliation would not arouse any pity from me, but his destroying what was once a fine Malay institution – Umno – would.

The only redeeming part to the whole ugly saga would be that Abdullah would also bring down with him the "practise pundits" and "practise editors" in the mainstream media, as well as the "practise academics" and "practise intellectuals" in our universities.

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