

Abolish the BTN course!
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For many years, I have heard from university students and some civil servants whispering their silent tales of horror at the Biro Tatanegara courses that they had attended.

These were mostly non-Malays who were completely unprepared for the very racist assertions of the BTN lecturers.

I was dying to get my hand on some real material proof from these former participants, like pamphlets, tapes or even photos, so I could write about it on *Malaysiakini*.

But I was told no such materials were ever left behind, and in some cases, they had to swear to an oath of silence.

Then, all of a sudden, it took the Pakatan Rakyat state government in Selangor to open up the whole can of worms that has been festering beneath the surface for decades within the secretive courses conducted by the BTN.

That the PR Selangor government has forbidden its civil servants and students in her state-owned educational institutions to take the BTN courses is ample proof of the benefits of an alternative government in the state.

Eternal one-party rule by the Umno dominated BN government would have continued to cover up the many questionable BTN teachings.

Sign of democratic progress

In retrospect, the more surprising thing is that such a prolonged programme aimed at social-engineering to mould and fashion the mental framework of students and civil servants had not been exposed much earlier.

That it has finally surfaced amidst great controversy is a sign of democratic progress in Malaysia. Many questions immediately spring to mind.

For instance, who are those lecturers who regularly prescribe important political and social values to young university students and civil servants?

What kind of qualification do they possess to address those burning political issues which are still under national debate? How do they treat disagreement from the participants?

Do they encourage debate or do they demand absolute acceptance of their words as absolute truth?

Are they contractors who are part of an enterprise to contract the work out from the government, or are they all civil servants?

Parliament made insignificant

My query about money is pertinent.

The DAP MP for Bukit Bendera Liew Chin Tong has revealed that the allocation for BTN for 2009 was RM74 million, while that for the Parliament in the same period was RM70 million, sending the message to the nation that the Parliament is not even as significant as a small government agency under the Prime Minister's Department.

By now, enough of the revelations have been leaked out to the outside world by former participants of BTN courses.

As an old Chinese saying goes, paper cannot keep fire under wraps forever; the truth would be out one day.

Cynical and informed Malaysian citizens should not be surprised by the BTN debacle, because their philosophy and modus operandi are in accordance with the policy of social conditioning practised by the Umno led BN government in schools, in the newspapers, in the civil service and in the mass media of communications.

The term ideological hegemony leaps to mind immediately.

In societies with totalitarian tendencies, even in those with regular elections, those in power will always be drawn to use the instrument of state to drum one brand of political narrative into the brains of those under their control, such as civil servants and students.

Forcing minds into prescribed mould

While doing this, they will also try to limit the people's access to public space, by monopolising all mass media of communication, and limiting the freedom of speech and information.

That is how they ensure that the official version of the nation's story will not have to confront competition from other narratives.

In this way, citizens are exposed to only one narrative, and without alternatives to offer options, their gullible mind tends to swallow the official manufactured version hook, line, and sinker.

Without having to apply physical force, this sort of social conditioning ensures citizens' acquiescence and subscription to the worldview and the politico-social values of the ruling elite.

This sort of extreme social control had long been foretold by visionary novelists such as George Orwell in 1984 and Aldous Huxley in *Brave New world* in the last century.

But the pseudo-scientific theoretical basis for this practice was probably laid down by Pavlov in his study of the dog's conditional reflex to reward and punishment.

To-day, the perfect laboratory to witness the successful implementation of this social control as applied to an entire nation is North Korea. It is a completely insulated society that has no access to the outside world.

From a very young age, North Korean citizens are exposed to one message only: To hate the USA, to love the great general, and to defend the revolution. The whole North Korea is one brain-washing classroom, day in and day out, year in and year out.

Thin line between Malaysia and N.Korea

Malaysia has always been a soft-authoritarian society, despite our democratic façade of voting once every four or five years.

The same impulse at monopolising the political narrative that surrounds a uniform national ideology is at work here as much as in North Korea.

The ideology that is meant to be imposed on the Malaysian soul is of course Umno's sectarian, exclusivist, divisive, and racially jaundiced views of the world. Hence, the BTN story!

Fortunately for Malaysia, despite the conservative and authoritarian forces at work for the first 60 years of our experiment with nationhood, our founding fathers had the vision of instituting the constitutional foundation of a parliamentary democracy.

That political system -despite all the impulse to thwart its growth - provides for the possibility and space for our society to grow and evolve - unlike in North Korea.

Over time, what was acceptable to Malaysians can no longer be tolerated, as is the case with the BTN business.

The fact that the legitimacy of the whole course content of the BTN programme can now be questioned, and the cabinet of the ruling party has decided to revamp it, is a declaration of victory by the democratic process in Malaysia.

But the real transgression of the BTN programme, and to a great extent the induction course required to be passed by professional and senior civil servants for them to be confirmed in their civil service, is not merely that they are often racial in nature.

The real transgression is the insult inflicted on their human dignity, their ultimate value as thinking and learning subjects.

Human beings of all races are by nature free thinking and acting agents, and in their diverse learning path, they necessarily emerge as a collection of plural individuals, even though they usually end up sharing some collective values and goals in politics.

To coerce them into taking a course of government prescribed materials on pains of punishment is to strip them of their human freedom and diminish their individual right to learn for themselves.

The existence of a course like the BTN is a piece of damning evidence that the government has no trust in the students and civil servants to nurture their civic consciousness and their sense of patriotism in their individual way.

There is no need to "revamp" or "upgrade" the BTN course. Just abolish it, and we will take the first step towards becoming a first world nation.

Send the RM74 million to Parliament for the MPs to do more work for the country instead

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