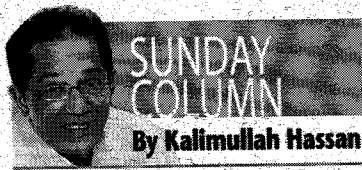


Growing legion of the unfooled

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By Kalimullah Hassan

RAMADAN, the month of fasting, has great significance for Muslims. But in Malaysia, over the years, it has also become a season for all Malaysians.

For Muslims, it is a period of sacrifice, of restraint, a test of will, of refrain, of patience and of charity. Of course, not all Muslims observe the tenets as they should.

For some, it is just fasting from dawn to dusk. For some, even fasting is a chore.

But the majority do their best to observe Ramadan as it should be observed. If only people could exercise the same tolerance, humility, charity and peace throughout the year, Malaysia would be an even more wonderful place.

A unique aspect of Ramadan in Malaysia is the *buka puasa* culture which has evolved over the years where friends of different religions and backgrounds get together to break fast. You do not see this widespread phenomena in any other part of the world.

Save for when we break fast at home with the family, all our outside *buka puasa* engagements always include friends who are Buddhists, Christians or Hindus and there is absolutely no awkwardness at all.

While the Muslims go off and perform their *Maghrib* prayers immediately after breaking their fast with dates and a drink, the others nibble on finger food and resume eating when prayers end.

It took years for this culture to develop, but today it has become our way of life. Just like the *Kongsi Raya* or *Deepa-Raya* and the tradition of Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Christmas or Hari Raya open house.

This is what I miss most when I am abroad during festive seasons.

This year, much to our disenchantment, my family will be separately celebrating Hari Raya in three different continents.

And I know what we will miss most — the preceding *buka puasa*, the Hari Raya prayers, the seeking of forgiveness when we return from the mosque, and the open house when families, friends and neighbours get together.

Almost inevitably, a lot of tears are shed as we seek forgiveness from each other and remember an unkind word uttered or unkind deed committed. Almost inevitably, we are reminded of the need to be more sensitive in the coming year and tread more carefully when dealing with each other.

I do believe that we become better people, year by year.

Again, if only all the wisdom and sensibility that we have cultivated over the years were to come at one go, when we are younger, then the world would be a better place. Perhaps that is too much to ask because we are, unfortunately, only human.

Had *buka puasa* with a couple of friends over the week. One of them, a world-class award-winning Australian sailor, was quite amazed to see different Malaysians dining at the same table over Ramadan. His short love affair with things Malaysian only grew.

But despite the fasting month, conversations at the *buka puasa* table don't differ much from the coffee shop talk on normal days.

It always comes back to the topic of the day — whether it's the sugar shortage, the Blair-Brown fallout, the Thai coup or Malaysia's favourite, politics.

Much as he was intrigued on why some Malaysian politicians spend so much time politicking and why Malaysians spend so much time talking politics, the Australian gentleman said the principles of politics were no different anywhere.

It's all about the power game, and all politicians play to win, even if the cost to people and country is high, he said.

He related the story of two Australian politicians — one pushing for a controversial Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the other opposing it.

The proponent of the GST took a great risk in pushing an unpopular policy and his opponent capitalised on it, resorting to crude personal attacks.

At the end of the "game", the opposing politician told the GST-proponent: "I actually like you and admire you. But I had to win the game."

A game? So it's not always about convictions? About the larger good of the country and the people?

I suppose we cannot tar all politicians with the same brush.

Just like there are good and bad journalists, good and really bad lawyers, good and bad civil servants, there are also good and bad politicians.

On a subsequent night, at another *buka puasa*, someone asked why Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew had haughtily

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commented about the Chinese in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Lee, who ruled Singapore with an iron fist when he was Prime Minister of the island republic for more than two decades, has maintained his influence by remaining in the Cabinet first as senior minister and now, in the uniquely Singapore-created position of Minister Mentor.

Lee claimed that the Chinese in Malaysia are marginalised and compliant and that Malaysia and Indonesia wanted Singapore to "be like their Chinese — compliant".

We should not be surprised that Lee made that statement. It is not alien for him to get on the high moral ground and make derogatory com-

ments on the affairs of other countries.

There were many theories on why Lee would have wanted to make such profoundly inaccurate observation about Malaysia, especially when relations between Singapore and both Malaysia and Indonesia had taken on a better turn in the last few years.

"Wag the dog" — that was the common consensus at our table of Chinese, Indians and Malays.

Here was Singapore being criticised for renegeing on a promise to allow non-governmental organisation protesters at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings in Singapore and foreign officials wondering aloud whether it would be in the greater interests of freedom not to have such high-level conferences in the island republic in future.

In Thailand, a coup was fermenting against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra which centred around the sale of his telecommunications company to Singapore's Temasek which is run by Lee's daughter-in-law, Ho Ching.

The unbridled Thai Press has been at it for months, questioning Temasek's purchase, and alleging and alluding all kinds of opaqueness in the deal. Temasek has, of course, denied the charges.

So what better way to divert the attention of fellow Singaporeans and seek the sympathy of the international audience by reverting to the age-old and tested formula of the "big brothers" from Indonesia and Malaysia trying to bully "poor, little Singapore"?

Only, this time, Malaysia reacted in proper and civil fashion — seeking an explanation from Lee on what certainly was an ill-thought, inconsiderate and provocative statement.

Had Malaysia reacted in any other way, it would have only lent credence to Lee's assertions of a "bullying big brother".

Lee may not have changed but

Malaysia has changed a lot from the days when he was engaged in building up his island state in a period of great recrimination between both countries.

Today, both countries' leaders often speak about the need to leave past emotional baggage behind and work towards a new era of friendship and co-operation as two sovereign nations should. But, it appears, Lee's baggage is still in tow.

The facts, Lee, are different. Yes, there are continued grumblings about the abuses in the New Economic Policy's aims of restructuring society but not one Malaysian who has studied the country's history and grew up in pre-May 13 Malaysia will dispute that it is the Tun Abdul Razak-initiated NEP which provided the stability and peace for Malaysia to become what it is today.

Take the top 20 richest Malaysians and more than half are Chinese. There are also Bumiputeras and Indians on that list now, a sure sign that no one is targeted for marginalisation.

Malaysia has Tamil and Chinese-language schools. How many does Singapore have for its own multi-racial population?

The Malaysian Cabinet is made up of all the country's races. How well are the minorities reflected in the Singapore government?

Sure, Malaysia is not perfect. There are many weaknesses. But we could also use statistics in Singapore and portray a picture of prejudice and marginalisation.

Talk about compliant people. Lim Kit Siang is not compliant; Karpal Singh is not compliant; Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat and Hadi Awang are not compliant; many NGOs are not compliant; the MCA is often not compliant as is the Chinese-based Gerakan; and most of all, many politicians in Umno are not compliant, leading to fractious battles every few years or so.

But they get their say and today, in the changing Malaysia, they have never had as much freedom to be "not compliant" as they have now.

Now let's look at Chee Soon Juan and J.B. Jeyaratnam or a host of others who were not compliant in Singapore.

We should all read *To Catch a Tartar* by Francis Seow and James Minchin's *No Man Is An Island*. Malaysia doesn't look so bad, does it?

Maybe my Australian dinner companion was right. It is just a game. Like some Malaysian politicians think it's a game to make unfounded allegations and tell lies to achieve their objectives.

But as we grow up, the legion of the unfooled is also expanding. And the legion of the unfooled in Singapore, too, has substantially outgrown the Cold War mentality of aging politicians.

It's the festive season. Ramadan, Aidil Fitri, Deepavali and then Christmas and Chinese New Year around the corner. 'Tis the season of forgiveness and friendship, Lee. Seek and ye shall find.

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