

Lessons from an imperfect vision 2020

Some of us may be excited about a 'normal' 2021 but best to remind ourselves to not squander the sacrifices made and continue to be careful.

AFTER the last flip of the calendar, lifestyle publications start asking a spectrum of Malaysians what they thought of the past year, and their predictions for the next one.

It is an elegant way to showcase how various individuals share similar opinions and hopes for the nation. The tone is usually celebratory and optimistic, with a touch of light-heartedness to divert attention from forgettable bad episodes.

I was not alone in finding difficulty in describing the accomplishments and failures of 2020. Any experienced social media user is used to navigating tricky balances: sharing happy moments that may bring joy to others but without gloating; promoting the good work of one's organisations but without taking excessive credit; highlighting important causes in the hope of raising funds but without a saviour complex; and celebrating the heroism of others but without barging in.

Trying to distil 2020 in a few short answers is an exercise in negotiating all the above. Yet, the act of flicking back through the year - whether in a verbose diary, an annotated flip-calendar or a col-

The first quarter outlook will depend on whether there is a spike from the holiday season.

our-coordinated app - reminds us of the expectation of growth each time the Earth completes another orbit around the sun.

A humbling perspective of this was given at the National Planetarium when trying to observe the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Datuk Seri Mazlan Othman explained their orbital positions through a projection upon the domed theatre. Our fragility was further emphasised when clouds blocked the view of this once-in-centuries event.

The sentence I settled upon in answering the open-ended "wish for the New Year" was this: that we do not squander all the sacrifices and learnings that we made in 2020.

Too many people have experienced hardship, poverty and discrimination made worse by Covid-19, and it would be a tragedy if lessons were not learnt and applied to bounce back stronger and remain resilient in the future.

I am in awe of the people I work with - who possess more dedication, more discipline, more talent and more resourcefulness than I do - who have already acted upon this mission in the last few months.

In this column throughout 2020, I have tried highlighting those efforts - whether in civil society activism, public policy advocacy, business innovation, educational initiatives, sporting prowess and musical camaraderie - and it remains my enduring belief that our nation can only progress cohesively if people from diverse fields find a common vision that can lead to a shared destiny ... with or without the participation of politicians.

But amidst all the expressions of hope, let's remember also to hold people who do wrong to account. In as much as heroism in times of adversity should be particularly praised, criminal and unethical behaviour should be particularly

condemned. Already, a tenuous political stability has benefitted from the uncertainties brought about by Covid-19, enabling politicians to get away with wrongdoings that ordinary people could never do - and feeding into the perception that punishments for past crimes will be paltry (and even then, those will evaporate), because for the powers that be (and want to be), securing political power is far more important than securing justice.

Business-owning friends have also told me how individuals in positions of authority - those who grant licences, endorse guidelines or police compliance - have asked for bribes, or given hassle even when there is no legal cause to do so.

Such instances are nothing new, of course - and the revelation of a meat cartel scandal in which meat was falsely labelled as *halal* - shows us that the corrupt have no qualms about offending religious sensibilities (even of their fellow Muslims).

But at a time when every bit of help is precious, to then be preyed upon by people who are supposed to uphold institutional integrity is utterly demoralising. It can have

long-term economic effects too: at least one couple (with generational ties to Malaya and Malaysia) are contemplating ditching their MM2H status based on numerous failures in recent months, including data breaches.

"Next year all our troubles will be miles away" is a line from the original version of *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, and although there remains doubt and controversy about the true cost and delivery of vaccines, I am hopeful that evidence from other countries, and endorsements by our medical fraternity, will overcome the scepticism borne by perceived political deficiencies and global conspiracies.

In the short term, much of the first quarter outlook will depend on whether there is an additional spike from the holiday season. Again: let's not squander the sacrifices already made, and continue to be careful even as some of us are getting increasingly excited about a "normal" 2021.

Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin is founding president of Ideas. The views expressed here are the writer's own.