



## All the pieces matter

NATHANIEL TAN

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad's relevance starts going into decline, and then he comes up with some wild statement, and everyone starts jumping up and down?

"Promoting a multi-ethnic country is against the Constitution" was what he reportedly tweeted recently.

I confess, there are times that I am perplexed why people would be any more upset over this statement than if he were to tweet something like "The Constitution allows only one religion to be practised in Malaysia".

In my humble opinion, both the statements above are equally ridiculous, and I would pay them no more mind than I would a statement like "Dragons are about to come screaming out of the sky tomorrow".

Are we all up in arms over this simply because it is Tun who is saying it?

I recently started watching *The Sandman* on Netflix (late, I know). I've been a Neil Gaiman fan for a long time. He wrote a book called *Good Omens*, together with another of my favourite authors, Terry Pratchett.

Both Gaiman and Pratchett, in the books *American Gods* and *Small Gods* respectively, explored this idea: the power that "gods" have, is proportional to the amount of belief that people put into them.

For example, in such a fantasy world, a spirit that nobody believed in would be nothing more than a mere imp, tiny and frail, unable to affect anything; whereas a spirit that millions of humans believed in, would be as strong as a mighty demon, towering above the tallest of buildings, able to crush entire cities underfoot.

The point of this concept is that the power of statements and people is proportional to the amount of attention we give them. In this, I must say that Tun is an absolute genius. I have seen few people able to command and manipulate attention to such a degree.

Any other Malaysian political leader whose party lost their deposit in every single seat they contested would be completely ignored by the press as irrelevant and not newsworthy.

Apparently the term or idea of an Internet troll has only been around since the 1980s or 1990s. It is quite something then, that a man who was born in the 1920s seems to be the most accom-



Still talking: Dr Mahathir's legacy will always be mixed and controversial, says the writer. - Photos: AZHAR MAHFOF/The Star

# The Mahathir merry-go-round

You ever get the feeling like you've seen this show before?

plished troll I have ever come across.

I'm not going to lie, over the course of my life, I have been on both sides of the trolling phenomenon. I remember "trolling" a Cabinet minister on Twitter very, very many years ago, and being very amused every time he would reply to any of my tweets.

This was because it really didn't matter what either he or I said. The fact that he was angrily replying to me essentially meant

I had already "succeeded" in my mission of trolling someone. For a Cabinet minister to descend to the level of an idiot like me was - to put it mildly - not a good look for him. I'm not super proud of having done this, but it taught me valuable lessons regarding who we should ignore.

Tun's legacy will always be mixed and controversial; I can say without hesitation, however, that my view is that the best strategy regarding Tun now is to

ignore him completely.

The only way to defeat trolls is to starve them, not feed them; this is the only way to turn the Godzilla-sized demon back into an imp.

To those who are paying extra careful attention, you will notice that in writing this article, I am already running afoul of the advice it contains. My only defence is, I suppose I write for a living, and well, a man's gotta eat.

There are people we need to pay attention to, and think about.

Progressive Malaysians can and should be paying close attention to, say, how PAS is doing in the polls, and what appeal they have to the millions of Malaysians who voted for them.

I rather doubt even half a million voters voted for Mahathir's Pejuang party. And yet, more Malaysians seem to talk about Mahathir than they do about PAS.

In my line of work, one must thus give professional credit where it's due, for someone so old to be able to achieve such a feat. Giving that credit however does not mean we need to keep feeding the troll.

There are so many more important things in Malaysia to talk about and work on.

If we are indeed concerned about building a multi-ethnic Malaysia - a cause I truly and deeply believe in - then let's do exactly that.

We won't achieve it by shutting people like Tun up or throwing them into jail.

We will achieve it by building multi-ethnic bonds at the grassroots level. We will build it by giving examples of what a happy, prosperous, and united multi-ethnic nation actually looks like.

It's crazy to think that in this, our 60th year of being Malaysia, we still do not see such examples anywhere near frequently enough.

The good news is, it's not something we need to wait for politicians to do. That power, and that responsibility, can be taken up by each and every one of us ordinary Malaysians.



If we are indeed concerned about building a multi-ethnic Malaysia, then we need to do exactly that - and we will achieve it by building bonds at the grassroots level, says the writer.

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