

The peril of ignorance under BN's continued rule
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LETTER | If one has access to an old copy of *Dewan Masyarakat* from 1987 or 1988, the year when the likes of the late Dr Rustam Sani or Allayarham Professor Syed Hussein Alatas used to write a weekly column in Malay, one would come across how they urged Malaysians of all generations to read.

In a way, their advice was not very different from the first revelation of the Quran, where the Angel Jibril, on the command of God, urged Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), to proclaim "iqrah". Or, read. From the original revelation, one can see the extent to which God insists on His creations being well-read and well-informed.

After all, the Arabs had for centuries prior to the introduction, and advent of Islam, become adept at poetry but poor in their social habits. Thus, Arabs prior to the coming of Islam, had social customs that included the killing of one's own female babies or female infanticide.

Even Khalifah Umar once cried, in recollection of his own act of burying his own baby daughter, when he finally became a Muslim. This was defined as the period of "Jahiliyah", or ignorance, where many barbaric practices of the Bedouins and Arabs, including defending the honour of each tribe in the name of "Asabiyah" (tribal solidarity), was far more supreme than defending the truth and justice.

Indeed, as far back as the 1980s, the National Literary Survey found out that on average, Malaysians only read one page of a book or a newspaper a year. Nothing has changed much perhaps.

Anyway, BN, through Umno, knew of this appalling statistic. And, Anwar Ibrahim was by then the minister of education too.

Anwar fought hard to change this tradition of sheer ignorance. He encouraged many Malaysians to read, to the extent that he was made "Tokoh Pembaca Buku" in 1987 by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Indeed, Dr Mahathir Mohamad in many public addresses talked about the importance of reason, science, technology and reading. He even introduced a Look East policy as early as 1982 to help Malaysia catch up with the good social habits of Japan and South Korea. And his policy of Islamisation was, in its most ideal form, a policy to be good thinkers and scientists.

But BN, including old members of PAS, were constantly trying to outdo each other in winning more and more general elections.

Thus, neither one of them could really focus on the actual Islamic tradition of reading, which is invariably based on strong intellectual dissent or challenge. Ulum Al-Quran or Ulum Al-Hadith were based on exacting scientific methods to understand the sources and spirit of the message embedded in both texts.

The magnitude of BN and PAS did not reach physical killing per se. But they became political parties that killed ideas. More precisely, these parties excelled at terminating anyone who would talk about the abuse of power or corruption. In the scheme of things of BN and PAS, dissent about abuse of power or corruption was not "Fardu Ain" (obligatory Islamic duties).

Maybe. Just maybe, they are "Fardu Kifayah" (non-obligatory Islamic duties). This is how bad Umno and PAS have become.

For example, "ibadah" means to pray, or prayer. But, truly, prayer means having the intellect and the ability to call a spade a spade if the government or even a political party was corrupt.

BN, indeed Umno and PAS, have failed Malaysians and Muslims time and again, by being what the late Professor Syed Hussein Alatas called "bebal", or stubborn to progressive ideas. As the former vice-chancellor of the University of Malaya, surely he knew "bebalism" had become widespread.

Anwar and Mahathir tried to correct the course by building the International Islamic University Malaysia. This is vastly different under Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak now.

Indeed, if one looks at the people serving Najib, such as his speechwriter Datuk Wira Khairil Annas Jusoh or Najib's political secretary Datuk Muhammad Khairun Aseh, they are products of the IIUM Law faculty under the late Professor Ahmad Mohamed Ibrahim.

Professor Ahmad Ibrahim's legal knowledge was as good as former Singapore prime minister Lee Kuan Yew. But Lee Kuan Yew could not tolerate a brilliant legal mind in Singapore, invariably, to challenge his own authority.

Thus, Ahmad Ibrahim was made to feel unwelcome in Singapore, and he moved to Malaysia. When he was alive, he had, to the best of his ability, used his knowledge to try to create an intelligent generation too. By then Ahmad Ibrahim was well into his 80s, and frail as well.

Instead, the two "Datuks" cannot even advise the prime minister on the danger of being too close to Saudi Arabia and US President Donald Trump, or, for that matter, President Xi Jinping of China.

Both "Datuks" have zero knowledge of three of the world's most potent countries that practise neoliberalism, Wahhabism and a mix of capitalism and communism in the case of China. Yet, they are there in the prime minister's office advising Najib, like the blind leading the blind.

If Malaysians do not vote BN and Umno, and indeed PAS, out of power, the power of "Jahiliyah" will entrench itself all over Malaysia.

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