

This is Malaysia, home of the...

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• RESILIENT:

LESSER men would have folded up a long time ago. Or they would have sacrificed their integrity, principles and beliefs in their haste to reach the apex of their careers.

But Tan Sri Abdul Malek Ahmad has always been different.

He knew he had all the tools — the intellect, the moral fibre and the compassion — to become one of the country's top judges. Yet, when he was overlooked several times in the 1990s, a.k.a. the dark days of the Malaysian judiciary, he did not sulk in his chambers or play truant on the golf greens.

He shrugged off the disappointment and continued dispensing justice with a clear conscience. It must have been grating seeing less capable men move into more senior positions, year after year. It must have been frustrating seeing an institution that he loved get dragged down into a quagmire of controversy and disrepute in the years following the 1988 judicial crisis.

Still, he stayed true to the calling, knowing deep down that it is impossible to keep good men down.

His day came on July 12, 2004. He was appointed president of the Court of Appeal.

His journey began in 1966 when he was appointed a magistrate in Kuala Lumpur. From there, he served in various positions such as deputy public prosecutor, Sessions Court president, Sessions Court senior president, High Court judge, Court of Appeal judge and Federal Court judge.

When he was appointed the president of the Court of Appeal in 2004, it was a rare day. Everyone agreed that it was a solid appoint-

ment. The Bar Council welcomed him. The Opposition embraced him. His peers on the Bench cheered him on.

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang welcomed his appointment as the "first bright spot in more than 15 years in the bleak and desolate scene of the justice system which will be greeted with unalloyed joy by the legal fraternity and the civil society". Hyperbole? Perhaps. But that was how most people viewed his elevation — as a bright light.

Two years on, what do they think of him? Has he performed to expectations? Has this one man changed the way the public and lawyers view the judiciary?

Judging by the comments in the visitors' book outside his hospital room, their respect and affection for him is intact. If anything, it may have grown, burnished no doubt by the even-handed manner in which he has managed his courtroom and the integrity of his judgments.

Over the past few weeks, Malay Rulers, judges, lawyers and family friends have made a beeline to visit him as he recovers from surgery.

A number have managed to spend a few minutes with him and showered him with affection.

A Malay Ruler held his hand and spoke to him in hushed tones, wishing him a speedy recovery.

Former Lord Presidents have jotted down encouraging words in the visitors' book as have several Bar Council officials. He was also visited by a senior judge whom he castigated in a judgment in 2001.

If there was a common theme in the pages of messages, it was this: You are needed, come back soon.

Count on him staying the course. Lesser men would have folded in the face of adversity.

But Abdul Malek Ahmad has nev-

er been one of them.

• SILLY:

IF there is a prize for the dumbest email, it must belong to Mohd Fauzi Mustaffa. He must have been living in a different planet for the past 49 years.

That's how long it has taken the government to try and get the different races to pull down the walls of suspicion that we have erected around ourselves.

Millions of ringgit have been spent on campaigns to promote better interaction among Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazandusuns, Iban, etc.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the moat of race and religion still separates many of us, especially in schools and universities.

So the last thing this country needs is another wedge to keep us apart.

And that was precisely what Mohd Fauzi did in an email to the staff of Takaful Malaysia Berhad.

He said that wishing "Happy Durga Pooja, Happy Lakshmi Pooja and Happy Deepavali" could be deemed as extending greetings to the Hindu gods Durga, Lakshmi and Krishna.

He claimed that this was blasphemous and against the teachings of Islam. The head of the company's syariah department, he added that Muslims who had extended such greetings to Hindus should repent immediately.

How should we react to such skewed thinking? Conventional wisdom says that those who spout silly statements and promote nonsensical ideas should be ignored. Instead of giving them any space or allowing them to grab a slice of the

limelight, they should be laughed at and forgotten.

That approach is fraught with risks. Unchallenged views may become accepted as the truth. Even more dangerous are unchallenged views by religious zealots, extremists and chauvinists. Over time, they gain credibility and move from the fringes onto the mainstream.

That is why any attempt by Christians, Hindus or Muslims to promote distorted religious views must be resisted fiercely. The final word on Mohd Fauzi's email was provided by muftis of Perak and

Selangor:

Both said that Muslims were encouraged to greet their non-Muslim friends during the festive season. Less clear was the stand taken by Takaful Malaysia.

In a statement posted on its website, it said that the email was meant for internal circulation. "The contents and views expressed are not Takaful Malaysia's official stand and definitely not an edict or final reference for use by unrelated parties."

Huh? Seems like saying a lot without saying anything.