

The prophet has shown the way

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Comment

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EXACTLY a fortnight ago, Malaysians were reminded of two significant events.

First, was the anniversary of the momentous national election held on March 8, the previous year. Interviews and opinions expressed in many newspapers, including this column, have been generally ambivalent in nature.

Many felt precious time had been squandered when a common platform could have been sought to help the nation in facing the difficult times ahead. Given the mini-budget announcement lately, it adds urgency to the situation.

The second significant event was the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, some 1483 years ago.

Although the prophet had never advocated any form of celebration for his birthday, many took the initiative to mark the occasion as a symbol of admiration and remembrance of the prophet who once led one of the world's fastest-growing religions despite (perhaps, because of) being the target of ridicule and absurdity by some quarters.

In North America alone, more than 20,000 people choose to embrace the Islamic faith every year. Reportedly, Islam is the second largest religion in the US and other European countries.

From these two reasons alone, there are many important lessons that can be drawn. This is especially so in anticipation of the negotiated leadership change that is about to take place in the near future.

If one fears that the very fabric of our society is being shredded by helplessness, corruption, unethical and scandalous practices, then a deeper appreciation of Muhammad's leadership is imperative for those who wish to make a difference.

For starters, Karen Armstrong, in her immaculately researched new book, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (2006), highlighted how his life was in fact one tireless campaign against greed, injustice and arrogance. Without doubt, this is the most challenging task faced by all worthy leaders at all levels today.

Conversely, as we see events unfolding in front of our eyes at this moment, we begin to sense what failures in leadership mean.

Yet some are oblivious, or still in a state of denial, or trapped in a game of endless bickering bursting with arrogance — all to show how dire the situation has become.

It is, therefore, not difficult to see why so few could command any influence or respect without some form of "promises" in cash or kind, even under the cloak called "democracy". They are out of character from the ways of Muhammad by a long shot.

On the contrary, those who knew him were touched by his gentleness, humility and sense of justice even when dealing with "enemies".

While some want to paint him as an intolerant war-monger and attribute his successes to the use of the sword, the fact remains that he spent most of his time engaging others to spread the message of peace. His involvement in wars was a mere fraction of what he did, only when he was forced to.

So Michael Hart ranked Muhammad top-most in his *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential People in History* (1992) not just because of his religious leadership, but because he was an active diplomat, philosopher, orator, legislator, merchant, reformer and military leader. Simply put, there is more to leadership than being a commander-in-chief as we see in recent times.

In today's terms perhaps, it is not so much the "hardpower" that makes a leader. Rather, it is the softpower" — to be judged not by the tangibles (the control of people, money, machines, land, etc). It is by the intangibles such as honesty, respect, humility and compassion which make up a human being, beyond just human capital.

In tandem with this, it is appropriate to recognise that Muhammad left very little, if at all, by way of material wealth as a mark of leadership.

Instead, he endowed a legacy of wide-ranging character-building values which remain relevant until today. It is not that the former is less important, but that it should emerge based on strong foundation of the latter.

Only in this way can we ensure a lasting, just and quality living arising from a just and quality leadership, as amply demonstrated by Muhammad.

It is not surprising, therefore, that he is fondly known as "Al-Amin" meaning "trustworthy" and was often sought out as an impartial arbitrator due to the trust that shines from his uprightness in character.

In the words of British philosopher Bernard Shaw, Muhammad is "the Saviour of Humanity". And this is the kind of leader we desperately need today. He does not have to be a prophet or a philosopher.

Suffice if he's a trustworthy and sincere human being who cares for humanity. This cannot be so difficult.

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