

Troublesome kiasu affair

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Article

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MALAYSIA, and indeed the world, witnessed yet another unique feature of Malaysian society when its citizens took part in the unique Malaysian-style open house in conjunction with Deepavali.

In a couple of days, this will be repeated again. This time, it will be to celebrate Eid-ul-Fitri, or Hari Raya Puasa.

Reportedly, an increasing number of non-Muslims have been observing the fast too. As one of them remarked, if we could have a *kongsi raya*, why not a *kongsi puasa*. Through the tribulations of puasa, one will appreciate Hari Raya even better.

Soon after that will be Hari Raya Haji, Christmas, New Year and Chinese New Year. For all of these festivities, Malaysians will display a spirit of togetherness, characteristic of a nascent *Bangsa Malaysia*.

Many have acknowledged Malaysia as a successful model in managing a society diverse in culture, race and religion.

This is precisely what former US President Bill Clinton and a group of community and non-governmental organisation leaders conveyed to the Prime Minister last month in a meeting in New York (NST, Sept. 21).

"They see Malaysia as a successful nation in this aspect and feel that the country's experience has to be studied and applied elsewhere," reported the Prime Minister.

So when another former head of state, this time closer to home, haughtily uttered what the Deputy Prime Minister termed as a "naughty" statement, the contrast was stark. The Prime Minister described that statement as "not welcome", a sentiment shared by Malaysians.

Ironically, those alleged to be "marginalised" evidently are among the most prosperous in the country. Neither are they "compliant" as was claimed. On the contrary, as highlighted, while other countries have disbanded the diversity of the vernacular school system within their boundaries, Malaysia still has a vibrant one.

As reiterated by the Prime Minister in his recent CNN interview, the diverse cultural heritage and religious practices are flourishing.

Of the many rejoinders, Paddy Bowie, a "neutral" Malaysian, was very instructive when she wrote "Sorry Minister Mentor but you got it all wrong" (NST, Oct. 1).

More so is her version of the fishing competition across the Causeway and also the analogy of "the West with palm trees" though others would prefer the "banana republic" tag (being yellow on the outside but white on the inside). Yet others, prefer *singa pura-pura* going by the recent article "The charade of meritocracy" by Michael Barr in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

As to why someone of such stature appeared to have no qualms about making such a highly-charged remark, Bowie suggested it has something to do with that special brand of *kiasu*, even when unprovoked. Otherwise, why the double-speak when in "the West with palm trees" the penalty for such a "crime" is to make someone a bankrupt?

Moreover, the Prime Minister is being realistic enough to admit there is no comparison between the two neighbouring countries, likening the comparison between a ciku and a durian?

In short, it is a complete waste of time unless there are hidden agendas to be pursued. It is in second guessing that agenda that the *kiasu* affair proves most troublesome, given the way the issue was framed for the consumption of the international community on the sidelines of the International Monetary Fund/World Bank meeting last month.

The tenor of language seems to mirror a familiar situation in the Middle East where a small, seemingly helpless, territory is surrounded by a sea of Arab (Muslim) community. That the region is in perpetual conflict, often sparked off by highly charged remarks and bellicose talk.

The parallel to the statement such as "to stand up against its bigger, Muslim-majority neighbour's" cannot be more obvious, what is more with reference to another small state (made to sound just as helpless) in this region. Worse still when the two small "helpless" states have much in common, not least in military terms.

Such a "naughty" statement can have far deeper ramifications depending how one chooses to read between the lines. The need for the "highly-charged remark" still begs to be answered. More urgently now, we have just been reminded yet again of the *kiasu* mechanism that can fire away anytime, even unprovoked.

What is very clear though is that all this is no less a reminder of how Malaysians must remain steadfast and more united than ever.

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