

## Lessons to be learnt from Harizal's case

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Article

[New Sunday Times - 05/22/2005](#)

THE overwhelming outpouring of sympathy for Ahmad Harizal Ahmad Fauzie, the so-called National Service dodger, shows that Malaysian society is very much alive and alert.

It is a sobering feeling that they care when it matters. This is, of course, not to say that Malaysians are disrespectful of the court of law.

The law must be obeyed and, as the saying goes, justice must not only be done but seen to be done as well.

But justice can come in many forms; some say it is a matter of interpretation. Recalling a narration from the early days of Islam, one could argue that there are different styles of administering justice.

In this case, it was a story of a boy who stole something to eat. Brought before the authorities to be punished, the boy was instead set free, recognised as a victim of an inequitable and unjust society.

In a way, what the boy did was a reflection of the level of social justice of the day. The boy was too poor to feed himself, and he had to resort to "stealing" to stay alive.

He was forced to act the way he did by circumstances prevailing at that time.

It was a time when one tolerated the marginalisation of the poor to the extent that some members of society had to resort to "crime" to make ends meet.

Could this be likened to Harizal's case, seemingly one who is forced to commit the "crime" of dodging National Service because he wanted to help his mother feed the impoverished family?

Wouldn't the wisdom in judgment displayed by the early Islamic authorities apply in this case, thus putting forth another form and style of justice?

For sure, Harizal broke the law, no arguments about that.

The law is just another question since, admittedly, the National Service, too, is not without its share of teething problems.

To quote the Press, many were excused from doing the service based on various reasons, including the one similar to that, of Harizal.

Remember, he was just 17 years old then, hardly an age to make sound decisions, and what more, coming from a broken home.

Harizal was faulted for not coming forward with his reasons much earlier (presumably he would have been excused otherwise) and not giving proper explanations when he was said to have told the authorities that he was "lazy".

Doubts have been raised whether this comes from the word *malas* or *sengan*, a term more likely to be used by those from the north, which can give a different complexion altogether to the meaning of the word.

Whatever the case may be, for those who know what it is like to be poor, isolated and deprived, they will acknowledge broad statements like "*saya malas nak pergi*" (or more likely *saya sengan nak pi*) are often a simple explanation to many other problems.

Moreover, while the employers are talking about poor communication skills among graduates, one wonders the level Harizal, a lower secondary school dropout, showed in a traumatic situation.

Again, one wonders why he was not represented by a professional during the court hearing. It surely must have been a traumatic experience for Harizal, his first time in court, handcuffs and all.

With hindsight, it is rather difficult to reconcile the "lazy" label for a "breadwinner" who evidently is helping to support his poor family by doing odd-jobs for at least two years.

If only we have the benefit of some foresight and wisdom in dealing with such issues.

In other words, what this amounts to is that we need to go beyond vague statements and face values, if we want to get to the bottom of things.

Particularly for the poor and disfranchised, giving broad excuses helps them to avoid wallowing in self-pity about how much they have to suffer in life, living from hand to mouth.

Being vague is a way of preserving their sanity, dignity and self-respect so that they can go on living without asking for any sympathy.

Understandably, the likes of Harizal are too preoccupied in managing their own world to care about the world outside, much less, programmes others decide for them.

Their immediate goal is survival, thus, their psyche and priorities are different.

For example, when their peers are busy talking about which latest mobile phone models to buy, they would be lucky to afford even a news paper (as reported in Utusan Malaysia, May 12). Hence, pleading guilty is a quick way out, although one may have to suffer silently as a consequence.

It was only when Harizal could not pay the fine that his case attracted the attention of many Malaysians.

Otherwise, his family, too, would have continued to suffer in silence, posing yet another question: What is justice and fairness in a world that itself does not seem to be just and fair?

With the current talk of implementing social work as a form of "punishment", it looks like Harizal has been doing just that for the last two years, and in a very significant way at that, by earning meagre sums for the family.

More significantly, he plodded along as a responsible and patriotic son of a family that needed his undying support.

He did not rely on subsidies, sought sympathy or asked for advantages like other members of society or companies.



New beginning: Harizal (left) starting his course at Akademi Binaan Malaysia in Bandar Darul Aman, Kedah

A positive turn to an otherwise sad story is that he can now be nurtured into a good entrepreneur with the training he is undergoing at present.

Now that Harizal has learnt his lesson, we, too, as a society must learn ours. And there are plenty of lessons to be learnt.

Perhaps Harizal himself can offer many lessons, once we are able to unravel some of the deep-seated issues that have been plaguing him and his family and, perhaps, society at large, too.

This is important to emphasise because there are still many Harizals out there who are below the radar screen, until they make it into the media one way or another, usually in an unpleasant way.

Here, the principles of Islam Hadhari, namely building a society that is just and trustworthy and having a good quality of life, cannot be more relevant.

But, most of all, a little wisdom can take us a long way.

