

COMMENT

Malaysian leaders' coming of age

KARPAL'S DEATH: Kind words pour in from both sides of the political divide

LEADERS in public office are observed all the time, in all contexts. There is often a blurring between the official and the personal.

People in public office hold their offices in trust, in stewardship. In ordinary times, difficult times and times of intensity in collective experience, leaders should take special care to be role models, measured in their values, thinking processes, utterances and writings.

The experience of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, with its complexities and technicalities, has silenced lesser leaders who would do anything to earn political and personal mileage out of other people's difficulties and tragedies.

Other experiences of global and national tragedies and loss because of earthquakes, tsunamis or incidents like the South Korean ferry tragedy have evoked a range of the basic emotions of sympathy, empathy and compassion, globally, for there is often human association with loss, parting and sudden death.

Whatever people's reactions to leaders who are influential in their own ways, there is evidence of a boldness in their maturity, statesmanship and in just being human.

They have expressed sadness appropriately regarding the tragedies experienced by accident victims and their families, for whom they record condolences appropriately.

Of the late Karpal Singh, they have made the following remarks:

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said: "We need people from the opposition who talk sense. Karpal criticised the government when he perceived things were not right. Some of his criticisms had basis."

Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, typical of his generosity, said: "We are poorer for the loss of a great legal mind and a crusader for justice and human rights."

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said: "In politics, he was an implacable leader. In law, a committed advocate."

Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said: "Karpal



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Well-wishers accompanying the vehicle carrying the late Karpal Singh in George Town, Penang, before the cremation. Pic by Danial Saad

was a bold man who gave a voice to the people."

Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail said: "For all these years he defended (Datuk Seri) Anwar (Ibrahim), he did not want to accept a single sen" because of his pride, dignity and sense of justice.

Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat summed it up in a spiritual perspective: "He lived by his principle (in all domains) and took a firm stand that Malaysia is a secular society. I regret I could not educate him further on Islamic law and hudud."

Staff at the Palace of Justice, who had many encounters with him, narrated his courtesy and humility when acknowledging them in the elevator, different from the serious drama of his mien in the courtroom. They empathise and sadly

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We need a gentler circle of virtuous leaders

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reminisce that they will miss seeing him and his aide, Michael Cornelius, together again.

Thousands turned up to pay their respects, perhaps the largest such gathering in Penang's history. Symbolically, Karpal's remarkable career in politics and law saw his last journey by the Penang High Court, St Xavier's Institution and State Legislative Assembly. Good people do not demean, detract or dismiss significant contributions of adversaries.

When he said: "When one Karpal is removed, there will be 100 other Karpals", it is not just about his family, but symbolically, it is about having strong Malaysian leaders with character, who must ensure that no one "steals our children's future".

In the global arena celebrating humanity in the Olympics, in nation building focusing on national character and in personal odyssey, clarifying thinking processes, making intellectual distinctions and upholding core universal religious values, the spirit of mankind's humanity should be instructive:

*You are my adversary
But you are not my enemy
For your resistance gives me
strength*

*Your will gives me courage
Your spirit ennobles me.
And though I aim to defeat you,
Should I succeed*

*I will not humiliate you.
Instead, I would honour you.
For without you,
I would be a lesser man.*

In building national character, people must not accept and celebrate lesser leaders as the norm, but must honour leaders who strive to be the more, the good, the better, the best and the great in our cultural, educational, political and social gene pools.

Of the values that make a person great are integrity, compassion, respect, justness, mercy and willingness to learn. There is a certain boldness in maturity and striving for betterment. People never really arrive at perfection, but what is important is the work being done by individuals to become better persons.

Malaysia needs a gentler circle of virtuous leaders from all sections — ruling and opposition, business and public services, professionals and lay persons — who are exemplars of good, kind and balanced personalities, to be role models and inspire the people.

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