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I grew up in Kedah and Kedahans, while not an overly formal people, put great store on courtesy and manners. Known for being gentle people, we were governed by many rules on how we behaved and spoke, particularly to our elders.

For instance, it was considered extremely impolite to refer to ourselves as 'saya' (I) when speaking to family members (including extended family members). 'Saya' was considered so formal as to be snobby, even arrogant. (The extremely informal 'aku' however was beyond the pale; you only use it among very close friends who are allowed to call you the very rough 'hang'). Correctly speaking, you have to refer to yourself always by name, or at least the diminutive version of it, or, as some very traditional Kedah women would, as 'Che' (pronounced 'Chek', not 'Chay') though this is considered very 'manja'. Thus you would say, "Che tak tau la

sapa mai tadi pasai Che tak dak kat rumah." (I don't know who came just now because I was not home.)

Similarly, having to name one's parents posed great difficulties to the well-brought up Kedahan. Our parents' names were sacred, not to be bandied about. Perhaps it was a way of teaching us not to be arrogant about our family and origins. But if asked what our parents' names were, the reaction was often a certain amount of blushing and hand-wringing before a tiny voice finally whispered their names.

This was the way I grew up. And to this day I treat my elders with respect, even when I don't like them too much. I may now find it easier to refer to myself as 'saya' when I speak to someone in KL though I tend to retreat to the English 'I' when I can. Also, even 12 years after receiving my award from the Sultan of Selangor, I cannot bring myself to introduce myself by my title nor sign off anything but the most formal of letters with it. It's the Kedah way and what my parents taught me.

Not to say that Malays from other states are any less polite. We stick to many rules of courtesy. One of those I like is calling someone older than you 'Kak' or 'Abang' or 'Makcik/Aunty' or 'Pakcik/Uncle'. I still inwardly cringe when a young person calls me by my name although I have made it a rule that if they're over 25, they don't have to call me Aunty. And those who do call me Aunty aren't allowed to shout it out too loudly in public. But it's nice when, unbidden, young people easily address you as Kak or Aunty as a show of respect. It also tells you a lot about their upbringing.

Why am I talking about upbringing? It's really been prompted by that video I posted yesterday on the Shah Alam dialogue-turned-fracas. Over the years I have become aware that civility is really becoming uncool. People are rude everywhere, whether on the roads, in shops (you know, the ubiquitous and automatic 'no stock' without even bothering to look) or on the phone. Most of it is shrugged off as the daily irritations of city life and frankly sometimes on a bad day I can be curt too.

But one of the occasions in which I am never impolite is in a meeting. Over the years I have been in numerous meetings/dialogues/conferences/consultations, whatever you want to call them. They can be tedious, boring, frustrating and annoying. But it's never served anyone well to be rude in them. I have faced very vocal opponents in several meetings and have never yielded to the temptation of shouting back at them. In fact the louder they get, the calmer I become. My philosophy is, just because a point is shouted doesn't make it a better argument.

Which is why when I watched that video it was clear to me that those people had no intention of having any dialogue at all. What dialogue is there when all one person can say (or rather shout repeatedly) is 'Bangang!'. One bespectacled man takes the mike and starts off speaking normally enough and then suddenly spins into some sort of hysterical dance, much like a child stamping its foot when it doesn't get something it wants. Another man, in a songkok to denote piety perhaps, grabs the mike behind the panel and starts shouting incomprehensibly. Someone else apparently took off his shoes and showed it to the MB. Did his mother teach him that?

But the 'star' is the young man with the ponytail who is a tubby hurricane unto himself, shouting,

waving, jumping up and down, rushing the panel, all the while not uttering a single comprehensible word that might advance his argument. I can almost picture how he drives his car.

I had to remind myself many times that this was happening during Ramadan, when we are enjoined to exercise restraint. Did these people then go home and eat since surely their puasa was batal'd?

It still puzzles me what the reason for not having the temple in their neighbourhood is. I was following the whole session on Twitter and apparently one woman claimed that having the temple there would cause house prices to fall and crime rates to rise. The logic of that escapes me. In my neighbourhood, there is a mosque, a temple and a church within shouting distance of one another and there is no problem, apart from the traffic jams and indiscriminate parking on Fridays. Although crime is a problem in my area, it can't be attributed to the presence of places of worship, and house prices have risen to ridiculous levels.

I did start to wonder though, is there no mosque in Section 23? Would they rather there be a mosque where the temple is to be? If so, why put it in a factory area?

Even so, what trouble would a temple bring except from these people themselves? In what way does it intrude into their lives? And as a friend pointed out, if being in the majority is the excuse not to have a place of worship of a minority faith, then there would be no mosques in America or Europe.

But back to the behaviour of these people, this is the most troubling part of it. These are the people on whom the government and the police base their arguments for not allowing demos or for using the ISA, notwithstanding the allegations that these are pro-BN people and that most probably they will never be hauled up. These are the examples pointed to when people say that demos can't be allowed because people can't control their emotions and behave rationally. These are the people held up as 'typical' Malaysians, a notion I find extremely insulting.

Even more ironically, these are the very same people who insist that we must keep the ISA, because they assume that everyone must behave like them in situations like this. That, just because they can't be trusted to discuss anything in a civilised manner, nobody else can either. They see the world entirely as mirrors of themselves, no matter how ugly that reflection. Or perhaps it's a distorted mirror they are looking at, where all their reflections come out beautiful.

We know that there are many people out there perfectly capable of intelligent, calm and rational discussion. In fact our culture dictates that that's how we conduct ourselves. Only a few people are predisposed to acting like neanderthals, whose idea of a good 'dialogue' is when the outcome has been predetermined to their advantage. Make no mistake, these types transcend race. But in this case, it is clear that the ugly ones are those who claim to represent my race and religion. I'm sorry but I refuse to be represented by them.

But the trouble is, the excuse for maintaining harsh laws will be these people. Just because a small number of people don't know how to behave, the rest of us are the ones who will have to suffer.

Already the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) has asked for these videos to be taken down. I suspect it's because it makes Malays look bad. Could there be a sense of shame after all? But the official excuse is that Indians will get offended. Well I'm sorry la, but every decent right-thinking Malaysian is offended, not just Indians. And for that decency, we are going to be punished.

God help us, Malaysia.

Kak Marina is also one of the key bloggers behind the Let's Read the Quran campaign. You can read her blog at <http://rantingsbymm.blogspot.com/>

The End of Civility?

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