

Appreciating the ‘flower’ of democracy

By [Prof Dr Mohd Tajuddin Mohd Rasdi](#)

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It’s a good thing not to be thrown into jail for criticising our leaders. But that doesn’t mean we should go to extremes in the other direction.

THERE’S a Malay saying that goes like this: “Seperti kera mendapat bunga”. Literally, it translates as “like a monkey getting a flower”.

Metaphorically, it means someone is unable to appreciate the precious thing that they have been given. The monkey does not know how to appreciate a flower and will destroy it in its curiosity, hunger or indifference.

Well, I fear the current government is that “flower” given to people who do not know how to appreciate it. At the time of writing this, I am most disappointed with my fellow citizens.

Let us take the Pardons Board’s halving of Datuk Seri Najib Razak’s prison term and lessening of his fines, for instance.

When the news was released, all hell broke loose, as they say.

Quick to respond in a most demeaning manner was one of the DAP’s sterling politicians: His Facebook post, to me, smacked of the racist attitudes of Malay politicians of the past – in fact, I’m sorry to have to say that the words were even worse than racist remarks I had read or heard previously. For shame.

Then came comments from a former Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission director as well as a young politician, himself facing corruption charges, hurling unfounded and unverified accusations against Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the unity government.

And then there were the calls by Bersih to fill the streets with protest.

I suspect that was more about showing off the street cred of the NGO’s new leadership than a considered response to what is best for the country.

The Bar Council even said that the pardon process needs to be reviewed to ensure there is no interference from the executive.

The Feb 5 “Reflecting on the Law” column in The Star by learned Constitution scholar Prof Shad Saleem Faruqi should have laid the issue to rest.

He makes it clear that the King was not a mere puppet – the Pardons Board that heard Najib’s application was chaired by then Yang di-Pertuan Agong Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri’ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah – acceding to the demands of the other four citizen members of the Board.

The column also makes it clear that the Board’s proceedings must remain strictly confidential on the grounds of compassion and clemency. But no, calls have been rudely made to make the proceedings public.

Najib’s lawyer, Tan Sri Muhammad Shafee Abdullah, claimed there were “inconsistencies” in the Board’s “unclear processes”.

He has also been reported as claiming that Sultan Abdullah had wanted to grant a full pardon but, persuaded by the other Board members, “settled” on the middle course of a remission instead.

I – and I’m sure many Malaysians who value the royal institution – want to hear a public apology for this, and all the false accusations made against the PM and government.

And the apology should be made as loudly as these rude comments were pronounced.

What is happening to this country? Democracy does not give us the moral right to accuse the PM and other office bearers willy-nilly and in a manner most unbecoming – like that Facebook post by that DAP member.

To say what he did to a Malay leader was playing with fire.

Is this how we “advise” the government now? Shoot first and don’t say sorry later?

Look at the “ke****” issue that got Anwar into hot water.

The PM was reading from the Hikayat Hang Tuah published in 1908! I quoted the same passage in one of my previous columns – why was I not chastised?

If more people took the trouble to read the Hikayat then perhaps we wouldn’t have this situation of “terlajak perahu boleh diundur, tetapi terlajak kata, buruk padahnya (a boat that goes too far can be turned back, but words that go too far will lead to disaster)”.

Then there was the whole “conversion” issue.

People seemingly went berserk over Anwar reportedly “converting” an Indian.

A simple check of facts reveals that the man had already converted but he wanted to profess his shahadah (testimony) in front of the Prime Minister who happened to be performing prayers at that mosque. So there was no conversion but simply the act of witnessing.

Now, has anybody apologised to Anwar? I don't think so – not for blowing this issue up for no reason, not for insulting him simply for reading a historical passage containing the “k” word, and certainly not for the false accusations thrown around over the Pardons Board affair.

I used to think that if this country headed towards failure, it would largely be because of those members of my own race and faith who are ignorant and arrogant. God knows I too have been on the receiving end of their false accusations.

But now, ever since providence took us a step forward by giving us a unity government, it is, surprisingly, those not of my race and faith who seem to have forgotten how to discuss anything rationally; a few seem to be under the delusion that in a democracy it is OK to speak how you like to the PM (especially since he likely won't throw you into jail over insults, as previous PMs did).

An improved democracy that is tentatively giving us more freedom of speech is like that flower given to the monkey that abuses and misuses its delicate beauty.

I do not know where we go from here, but I do know where we will most probably end up.

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