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Along The Watchtower by M. Veera Pandiyan

Racist remarks should not be swept under the carpet, as this can only result in the entire party sharing the blame and bearing the consequences.

LET'S face it: most people have inherent racist thoughts, leanings or prejudices.

It's part of being human. The propensity to defend one's own ethnic group and regard it as

something special is quite natural everywhere in the world.

It can be argued that the tendency to keep within the confines of our own tribes and ethnic groups has contributed to the success of human survival in evolutionary history.

But as races, humans have not only harboured prejudice or discrimination against each other but also resorted to killing and enslavement. Of course, that was all in the past. Or so we like to believe.

Today, as civilised people, we are expected to accept the diversity of races, cultures and religions.

Racism is taboo in the modern world, more so if it is linked with leadership. Sure, racism still lurks in the minds of some people, but it is not a big concern if it just stays there.

However, it is definitely a serious issue when racist thoughts and arguments are made publicly,

like it happens so often here in Malaysia, particularly from politicians of a party that is the lynchpin of the ruling coalition.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said on Sunday that racist comments from “one or two Umno leaders” should be ignored because the majority of members in the party were not racists.

The Prime Minister and Umno president stressed that the party’s policies had always been fair, inclusive and open.

“Umno is not a racist party. From the beginning, we have always wanted a multiracial society. Don’t listen to one or two leaders’ talk.

“All parties have leaders like that. Look at our policies from day one,” he said when opening the Gerakan national delegates’ conference.

It’s true that many parties have leaders like that, both within the Barisan Nasional and Pakatan

Rakyat.

One prominent glib-tongued one has long mastered the art of saying one thing to supporters who are of his race and religion, and another to racially mixed crowds

I still remember the old days when he was in a very powerful position. He would bluntly tell reporters covering his event: "What I said in my speech was only meant for the Malay media. Others need not report (it)."

But I digress. The point is, racist politicians should neither be disregarded nor ignored.

Their remarks should not be swept under the carpet, as this can only result in the entire party sharing the blame and bearing the repercussions.

Whether or not there are one or several such politicians in a party, they should be censured quickly and made to apologise publicly.

Like people elsewhere, Malaysians expect people in positions of leadership to hold themselves to higher standards of behaviour.

It's obvious that all parties must set clear indicators of acceptable behaviour. If any leader steps over the limit, he or she must be punished and, more importantly, be seen to be punished.

How can they stop making racist comments? Expanding the mind through reading might help, but if time is the excuse, I would recommend this educational website: www.ehow.com

The seven steps suggested here – http://www.ehow.com/how_2271156_stop-making-racist-comments.html – could be useful pointers:

> Consider how hurtful it is when someone makes a mean or rude comment about you. The same way those comments make you feel

angry, hurt or embarrassed is the same way your racist comments make someone of that race feel.

> Think before you speak. Take two to five seconds to consider how someone might take your words offensively before you say something. This pause can give you the time to word your thoughts in a considerate way.

This can be the difference between saying a racist comment and opening a positive dialogue between different races.

> Choose good friends. The old saying, “birds of a feather flock together,” is quite true. If all of your friends are constantly making racist comments, this will influence your thoughts and behaviour.

Try talking to your friends about why it’s harmful to make racist comments, but, if they continue, it may be time to find different friends.

> Get some history books and read about the long-term consequences of racism. Hatred and discrimination against people simply due to the colour of their skin or their ethnic origin has been the cause of great poverty, wars and even death.

Whether one is the oppressor or the oppressed, there are grave consequences that both sides eventually have to deal with because of the hatred.

> Stop stereotyping people based on their race. Every person is an individual and does not fit into one category simply because their skin looks the same.

If someone of your race committed a murder, you wouldn't want to be convicted of their crime simply because their skin matched yours.

When you stereotype based on race, it's just like convicting someone of a crime they didn't commit.

> Know that all races have good and bad people. Every race has people who have suffered due to racism and every race has people who are racist.

Accept that there is no superior race and all people are created equal. Base your judgments of others on their character and behaviour, not their race.

> Learn about other cultures. Often, it is ignorance of other cultures or a person's upbringing that causes him to make racist comments.

As you start to look at people of other races as someone's mother, father or sister who struggles, cries and has dreams just like you, you might even find a new best friend of a different race.

Associate Editor M. Veera Pandiyan likes this quote from lawyer and political activist Florynce R. Kennedy: There aren't too many people ready to die for racism. They'll kill for racism but they won't die for racism