

Avoid the paths of mutual recrimination

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HIGHER GROUND: It is essential to depersonalise politics



We would do well to remember Mahatma Gandhi's two teachings — first, violence achieves nothing; it only erodes the moral and ethical legitimacy. Second, an eye-for-an-eye, or tit-for-tat, escalates conflict and violence.



MAHATMA Gandhi famously once said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind".

The Mahatma was, of course, no stranger to protests against social injustice. Although a devout Hindu, he stoutly defended the rights of Muslims (sympathies for which he was later assassinated), the poor, women and the lower caste in his country.

Yet he always adhered to two principles. First, violence achieves nothing; it only erodes the moral and ethical legitimacy and integrity of one's actions. Second, and one which political scientists know well, an eye-for-an-eye, or tit-for-tat, escalates conflict and violence.

As we survey the landscape of our beloved Malaysia, we would do well to remember Guruji's two teachings. They are not merely the high ideals of Peaceniks everywhere but common sense logic. Unfortunately, they also underscore most of the world's truly great tragedies.

All actions, good or bad, have consequences. When the consequences trigger other ill-intended actions, we quickly enter a series of mutual recriminations that can spiral out of control. The situation never gets better; it only grows ever worse.

As Malaysians, we are taught from an early age to have regard for one another's ethnic and religious sensitivities. But if principles do not condition thought, and thought does not condition action, then a bleak collective future awaits us all.

How do we avoid entering a spiral of debilitating mutual recriminations and lock in to a path that will take us to a higher trajectory?

First, we obey the law. Whatever we do or do not believe the law to be, it is imperative to observe a power higher than ourselves and to which we must be subject. The law acts as a circuit breaker that is supposed to stop conflicts in their tracks, and allow the process of justice to go to work.

Once we believe that we can break the law just because we have a legitimate grievance or the strength of numbers to do so, then we are walking in dangerous territory. If we want to live in a civil and orderly society, then we must behave in a civil and orderly manner.

There will always be segments of the population -- any population -- that not only beg to differ but who expect to be treated with respect and cordiality, while demonstrating none of these attributes themselves. For these, the only answer is to hold them accountable to an objective and impartial law.

Second, we should express, and be encouraged to express, our deep personal and collective convictions in legitimate and defensible ways. Like the law, these processes may be imperfect but no process is ever perfect. All are mere rough approximations of society's changing needs and wants and need tending.

The same anger and frustration that has the potential to destroy a country can, if properly harnessed, also be a great energy source for betterment. What makes a startling difference is whether existing processes empower or disempower individuals.

Powerlessness is debilitating. Left to fester, it is the breeding ground for failed states. But marshalled against society's major afflictions -- such as corruption, poverty, ignorance and abuse of power -- it can have truly revolutionary consequences.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, we must never forget that we are more than a collection of individuals. With general elections drawing near and burning issues on the table, it is easy to get caught up in embarrassing low-level gutter politics and forget that there is a far greater prize to be won or lost.

That prize is nationhood. Contrary to what many Malaysians seem to think, there is no separation of politics from the economy or from society. The three are not separate entities, each hovering over the country like a cloud. Nor do they sit neatly in boxes on a PowerPoint presentation.

Instead, every citizen is a composite of all three. This is the ultimate reality and why it is essential to prize them regardless of their race, backgrounds or beliefs. This is why it is essential to depersonalise politics and to stop dehumanising and pitting one Malaysian against another.

In an age where protests occupy centre stage and retaliation is a main preoccupation, Gandhian thought may seem dated and tired. But are civility, dignity and respect?

If the answer to the latter is no, then Malaysians had better step back from the brink and protest for a better future.