

Feeding political gremlins

By Dato' Steven Wong

TOOL OR MASTER? *When the people allow politics to consume all reason, all life become enslaved to it*

EVERYTHING is politics; but, is politics everything? In many countries, there are very different views about how they should be led, the policies that should be pursued and how state institutions should implement them.

There is an eclectic mix of conservatives, liberals, progressives and reactionaries of practically every stripe, either demanding change or reacting against it.

There will be those who insist that the status quo must be preserved, for whom change is to be feared and rejected. Many times, these are ones that hold political, economic or social power and whose personal and community interests stand to be affected. Some, however, seem to genuinely believe that change will open a Pandora's Box of evils.

Then there are those, being either sufferers or sympathisers of wrongs and injustice, who demand that things be done very differently. These are not just intellectuals, but sometimes otherwise-disinterested professionals. They may even include bigoted religious ideologues, showing what a disparate group this can be.

To one group, the other can do no right, while they themselves can do no wrong. What the other side says are blatant lies, and only they are keepers of the truth.

In the past, struggles to assert influence and impose one's worldviews, values and beliefs were bloody and murderous affairs. They still are in some parts of the world today. By and large, however, we settle matters more civilly today — at the polling booths, in houses of parliament (or their equivalent) and the courts.

A democratic process held once every five years or so hands legitimate power to one or more of these groups to run the country according to popular acclaim. This is the ideal, however, and there is no assurance that the other groups will necessarily fall in line and wait for their chance to take over the wheel.

This is particularly the case when the results of the electoral process are slim or do not reflect the popular vote. This is especially so when those who are given the reins of power start to distribute and use it in ways that are widely seen as unpopular, suppressive and even violent. The latter are clear signs that not all is well.

Proponents of change may be able to voice their dissatisfaction but achieve very little, especially if the stack is decisively loaded against them. It is a tribute to any country when differences are peacefully contained within the political system and not taken or forced outside of it.

Spare a thought, however, for yet a third, and often very small group of people who want or whose difficult job it is to manage and advance the interests of the country despite highly polarised views. They try to do the right things, to get on with the job of promoting economic growth and employment, instilling good governance and ensuring social inclusiveness.

Most times, however, they are pounded and pounced on at every turn. Their motivations are questioned. Many are accused of working for the interests of one party or another. Indeed, a few of



While some believe the status quo must remain, there are others who genuinely believe that political change will open at Pandora's Box of evils.

them, looking at the pain that they face, actually do. The rest are disempowered and demotivated. They literally need to have nerves and moral fibres of steel.

Imagine an organisation where those in power are busy entrenching themselves in their own position while others are passionately but unsuccessfully trying to dismantle them. The few that still believe in the organisation and want to get on with advancing its interests are neutered and neutralised.

Can anything good emerge from such a situation? Will the organisation thrive or is it heading into a steep and irrecoverable slump? In the absence of productive energies, level-headed common sense says the answer is no – nothing positive can happen but the contrary almost certainly must.

There was a time when despite heatedly opposing views, values of moderation and knowledge of right and wrong still gave space for the third group to operate. Because of this, countries were able to achieve extraordinary things such as alleviating poverty and enjoying higher standards of living.

Today, this is no longer the case. Trenchant low-brow politics has locked many countries into downward trajectories. It is left to the reader to determine whether there is any relevance at all to current goings-on, either here in this country or elsewhere.

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