

Respect is appreciation for others' morality, humanity

CHARACTER: Respect for another Malaysian is cultivated, rather than earned

OF all the things that bind a nation together, perhaps none is more fundamental than respect. Yet, respect is a much used and abused word.

Like other terms — patriotism, tolerance and good governance spring to mind — words can be manipulated to suit particular interests and circumstances as to lose their meanings.

Little surprise that we shout at each other more than we speak, our words convey so little actual content.

We are told to show respect for those in authority. The morality of actions or otherwise does not seem to matter a whit. It is illegal to show the slightest hint of disrespect. We just have to grin and bear it.

Woe betide the lesser being who, perhaps out of a sense of utter frustration or a lack of judgment, lashes out with an ill-advised phrase or sentence at the wrong time. Penalties can include a sentence in a prison cell.

But there are privileged ones who are allowed to show not only disrespect but contempt for others and get away with it.

In the name of defending a community's dignity and pride, they are permitted to threaten violence and hurl invectives, completely without sanction.

The irony of their actions is lost on them.

There is something to be said for the fact that there must be respect for the institution or the office.

Respect for another Malaysian is not just earned, it is cultivated.

Certainly, it is cultivated through appreciation of contributions, dedication and efforts.

But respect is also appreciation of their inherent morality, integrity and humanity.

Of course, no person or community is without blemish and it is important not to adopt a highly romanticised and jaundiced view.

The best role models are still subject to human foibles and it is best that these be recognised rather than whispered in the shadows.

At the end of the day, respect is the result of the appreciation of contributions and character.

In our egotistical rush to get ahead, we seem to have willingly, and mistakenly, swapped wealth and the edifices of power for rock-solid achievements and rock-solid values and beliefs.

In Malaysia, at least three things hold us back from cultivating respect.

The first is a skewed perspective on history.

The exploits of what may well turn out to be mythical figures are extolled in books, while Malaysians who have exercised moral leadership and integrity through turbulent times are hardly included.

The second is a really skewed perspective of culture.

The reality is that communities of different cultures do co-exist in more or less peaceful melting pot circumstances.

The cultural narrative, however, is far different, being derived from the dominant and with scant attention given to others.

The third is a really skewed perspective on politics. Identity politics is alive and well in many places but in few places differences are turned into cleavages and fractures with state-supported relish.

We are told that this is a necessary given and to be unquestioning about the matter.

From these, we have built a house of cards, a nation founded on achieving an arbitrary per capita income level, but without the moral integrity and humanity to go with it.

We may have highly capable and wealthy individuals but with all the character of tiny goblins.

Suppressing facts, denying justice, stifling voices of protest and adopting token corrective measures while continuing to perpetuate illegitimate actions may be convenient ways of dealing with short-term fall-outs.

Rest assured, however, the dissent does not disappear.

This year we celebrate an independence that is one year short of 60. We cannot turn the clock back and undo past wrongs.

We can, however, undo present wrongs and set a course for the future but only with capable Malaysians of integrity onboard.

✉ steve@isis.org.my

The writer is deputy chief executive of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Iis) Malaysia

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DATUK STEVEN WONG