

Malaysia requires urgent infusion of new blood

How long does it take, before you are ready to lead the nation? Do you need to exist for six or seven decades before your name comes up for consideration?

I ask, because every time Malaysians discuss the potential leadership of the country, we end up talking about septuagenarians, octogenarians, and even a nonagenarian.

You know, people over the age of 70.

Yesterday, Munir Majid, an illustrious Malaysian with a record of sterling public service, submitted a letter to the FMT editor, which got published.

In the letter, he quoted Francis Fukuyama, the celebrated political scientist and author, who had identified three factors that were needed for successfully responding to this damned pandemic.

Fukuyama argues that a country needs a competent state apparatus; a government that the citizens trust and listen to; and effective leaders to manage the fallout ensuing from this global crisis.

Well, in Malaysia, as it stands, we seem to be failing in all three criterions.

And, if we keep looking to the very same people who put us in peril, to once again lead us, I reckon we are the ones who seriously need our heads examined.

Isn't it time for many of our elected representatives to get voted out, so that the nation can resume functionality?

Only when the country's leadership gets a shot in the arm – an infusion of new blood – can we really move towards the sort of purpose-drive that a functional democracy requires.

Shouldn't we open the doors for younger Malaysians with fresh perspectives and no baggage, to lead?

Us voters must insist that more people from Generations X, Y and Z be allowed to stand in parliamentary and state elections, so that we can purge the borderline repressive leadership that we have right now.

Why younger people, you may ask?

Afterall, we live in a country where age is celebrated as the benchmark for wisdom. But then, we can also see that the greatest number of blunders, mistakes, and mismanagement have come from these older people, who seem to not display any wisdom whatsoever.

How else can you explain this unbridled thirst for power, when we are experiencing the biggest disaster in our lifetime?

Younger Malaysians, below the age of 45 or 50, seem to be the only people who really recognise that our social, educational, and economic systems need a complete overhaul, if they are to produce more equitable results and better outcomes for the citizens.

It is quite clear, especially after young people took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur, that the younger generation at least, sees the clear connection between this systemic failure and the many problems we live with today. And, they come from all walks of life and political affiliations.

Political patronage that thwarts proper governance; state apparatuses that are used for political expediency; horse-trading in parliament for power; the chaos that is created by the lack of cohesive policies on healthcare; the economic disaster that is being created by constant political manoeuvrings; and the looming constitutional crisis caused primarily due to the lack of integrity.

This is what we live with at a time when we need proper direction and guidance.

Younger people can influence the country and remedy the structural disasters we have, especially with regard to the racial and parochial mindsets that have prevailed for so long.

So, Malaysia, why don't we gamble and take a chance on our younger generation?

The irony is that all of the "saviours" who get debated about today, first came to major leadership roles and prominence when they were actually young people themselves.

Mahathir Mohammad first became education minister in 1974 when he was aged 49. And his on-again-off-again ally turned nemesis, Anwar Ibrahim, became a minister for the first time in 1983, when he was only a 36-year-old.

Another current leadership candidate, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah snagged his first ministerial job in 1976 when he was 39. And remember, Najib Razak took up his job as a chief minister of a state, at the tender age of 29.

Even our current PM was first appointed a deputy minister in 1982 when he was only 35 years old.

As a nation, we do have a history of entrusting younger people to positions of power and leadership.

It is just that young people also grow older and naturally reach their "sell-by-date".

In 2021, Finland was named the world's happiest country for the fourth consecutive year, in an annual UN-sponsored report.

To be fair, that country also has its fair share of problems, from mental health issues to drug offenses.

But Finland also dominates in many other global indicators, such as good governance, education and gender equality. The country seems to be equipped to make good policy choices that allow it to solve many of its nation's pressing problems.

Incidentally, these are problems that many countries, like Malaysia, grapple with.

Nordic countries are well-known for their progressive policies. But ultimately, these policy choices that serve the citizens of Finland, stem from their leadership.

But here's the interesting fact; Sanna Marin, their prime minister, is 35 years old, and the average age of the Marin cabinet in Finland is just 45.

In Malaysia, the demographics presented by the national department of statistics show that by 2018, we already had a staggering 45% of our population aged between 15 and 39.

Yet, by 2020, the average age of our cabinet was closer to 60.

Perhaps the time is ripe now for us to revisit this culture of electing younger people to Parliament, and allowing them to assume leadership roles.

Seriously, they cannot do more damage than this lot has already done. Heated discussions around who should take over leadership, are just an exercise in futility, if we keep circling back to these older people.

The system is broken, and it is going to take an infusion of new blood to repair it.

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