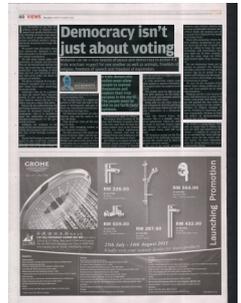


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Democracy isn't just about voting

Malaysia can be a true beacon of peace and democracy in action if it truly practises respect for one another as well as animals, freedom of religion, freedom of speech and freedom of expression.



It is fascinating to see how the political scene in Malaysia has turned from quality debating and truly focusing on issues that matter to the rakyat to gutter politics that include tarnishing another's image, blackmail, deception and savage-like behaviour.

We preach from the pulpit about how democratic Malaysia is and how everyone is to be subservient to the written Constitution.

We talk about human rights and protection of animals and precious flora in this blessed land and yet we read, day in and day out, about local authorities' cruel handling of stray dogs and cats and individuals posting, with great pride, the abuse of animals on websites.

The abuse of animals, be it in government regulated zoos or in people's home, have taken centre stage in recent weeks.

Authorities that are in a position to help and protect these voiceless friends of ours, such as Perhilitan, have failed to enforce the law to its fullest and put a stop to this abuse.

Excuses by the authorities that the governing legislation are inadequate cannot be accepted. Should it be inadequate, then it is incumbent upon the authorities to propose changes/amendments to the governing sections.

Similarly, we continue to see many of our historical infrastructure falling into disrepute right in front of the eyes of the Heritage Commissioner.

Maybe the Heritage Commissioner needs to take a leaf from countries that have long dealt with their local

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heritage, such as the City of Bath in England and the authorities in Rome and surrounding cities.

The tearing down of a significant portion of the Pudu Jail wall in the name of development only goes to show our commitment towards protecting these heritage sites.

The historical structures are what tourists, near and far, come to see and talk about.

They need not come all the way here to shop.

They have shopping centres in their respective countries.

We dare portray to the world our stand on human rights and the persecution that takes place in the Middle East and in other parts of the world when we, as a nation, have yet to ratify the convention that protects the fundamental rights of refugees.

We preach about freedom of the press and freedom of speech when at the very same time we have draconian statutes such as the Internal Security Act which legitimatises detention without trial and the Printing Presses and Publication Act which keeps the media in check.

We refuse to recognise people of different sexual orientations in this country simply because it allegedly does not conform to religious norms and societal values.

A truly democratic nation must allow people to express themselves and explore their true purpose in the world.

The people must be able to put forth their opinions on the formation of social and economic policies that directly affect them.

Being able to cast one's vote in state and general elections and being able to seek legal redress are not the only components of a democratic nation.

Take the United States, for instance. This is a globally recognised superpower which has done so much to promote human rights and advance the cause of refugees and people living with HIV and AIDS.

The American people are the first to attend to the sufferings of people around the world and to tend to disaster-stricken nations.

The rest of the world, including Malaysia, may criticise America for its many questionable decisions but, without doubt, the positive acts of its people have impacted the world on so many levels.

Those who constantly criticise the West without recognising its positive deed and all that it stands for must be willing to forgo the same technology and innovations that were born out of their creativity. Forgo the jeans, forgo the iPADS, forgo human rights, forgo democracy!

We see democracy being put to practice in countries like America and India, where the torching of the nation's flag by its people is not viewed with disdain and disrespect,

but is viewed, interestingly, as a sign of democracy in action.

We also see the President of the United States being grilled on foreign and local policies by its local representatives.

Malaysia can be a true beacon of peace and democracy in action if its leaders and people hold firmly and put into practice the true tenets of democracy; respect for one another, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of expression and, most importantly, freedom to form and deliver an opinion/criticism without fear or favour.

A truly democratic nation must allow people to express themselves and explore their true purpose in the world. The people must be able to put forth their opinions.

> The writer is a young lawyer. *Putik Lada, or pepper buds in Malay, captures the spirit and intention of this column – a platform for young lawyers to articulate their views and aspirations about the law, justice and a civil society. For more information about the young lawyers, visit www.malaysianbar.org.my.*