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The right to disagree

Societies need to be constantly reminded of the need to take stock of where they are headed and whether theirs is indeed the right path - thus the need for alternative views.



MARINA Mahathir and I are old friends.

Nonetheless, there have been times when I've totally disagreed with her, like all friends do.

However, even when we've held opposing views, I've always respected her straight-forwardness, courage and willingness to take a stand on matters of principle.

Whatever you think of her father (and I'm definitely not a fan) or indeed her own views on social and cultural matters, she remains unwavering in a country where the "lalang bending in the wind" is the best symbol to describe our political elite.

Marina's confidence and determination are all the more important right now.

Why? Well, Malaysian Muslims are entering into what I'd term a series of "Cultural Wars" over matters once thought too "sensitive" for open discussion, including race, religion and even sexuality.

Conservatives insist that all Malays and Muslims ought to subscribe to a single set of views on these issues.

This goes against contemporary realities.

Social media and widespread prosperity have made all Malaysians more self-aware.

There are now many competing Malay identities floating through our

nation and Marina is the voice and public face of the most plural of these amorphous groups.

They play an important role via their advocacy for Malaysians who are too poor, disadvantaged and marginalised to defend themselves.

Indeed, unlike so many children of our elite, Marina has chosen to dedicate her life to public service.

Her work with the Malaysian AIDS Council and advocacy for women's

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rights both in and outside the Muslim world speak for themselves.

What differentiates her from many Malay public figures is the fact that Marina has never shied away from the causes she believes in, even those that may be neither popular nor profitable in the country.

Her stubborn steadfastness represents the best tradition of public service and advocacy – a Malay who realises that “ketuanan Melayu” also carries responsibilities that transcends ethnicity or faith.

She deserves credit for taking on these challenges and remaining unflinching when under attack.

Indeed, she is truly her father’s daughter in this respect.

Still, she knows that the future will not be any easier for those on the “edges” of polite society (especially the GLBT – gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender – community) and her stance here is especially important.

Moreover, in an increasingly open Malaysia, anyone who wants a slice of public space has to fight for a hearing because there are many competing identities.

What’s disheartening is when people in power or shapers of public opinion choose to vilify or attempt to silence dissenting voices like Marina.

As I’ve said earlier, it’s impossible for any society to be completely united on anything, be it politics or religion.

Read history and you’ll understand that such societies have never lasted for very long.

Uniformity breeds mediocrity, stagnancy and failure.

Dissent is not disloyalty and anyone who says so is merely trying to shore up their power.

We need alternative views because societies need to be constantly reminded of the need to take stock of where they are headed and whether this is indeed the right path.

Democracy isn’t the tyranny of the majority but the protection of the rights and interests of all groups, no matter how distasteful they may seem to the other.

Indeed, all labels, whether “liberal”, “moderate”, “conservative”, “religious” and “secular” are legitimate and deserve protection as well as respect as long as they likewise respect the rights of others.

All our platitudes about moderation or national transformation will be pointless if we cannot extend this very basic courtesy to each other.

This is what voices like Marina are advocating, not the overthrow of our social norms or faith.

They’re also reminding us that the world is changing politically, socially and economically.

Malaysia will be left behind if we keep insisting on remaining in a time warp in any of these categories.

It’s very sad that this simple fact has escaped many people, but one

must be hopeful that good sense will prevail in the end.

In 1997, Marina published a compilation of her writings, entitled *In Liberal Doses*.

Besides her lively and engaging prose, what I found striking was the foreword that her father, then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad wrote for it.

Let me end by offering a quote from this piece, for what it’s worth:

“One is tempted to ask from where she acquired this sense of independence, this urge not to conform, to be critical and not just to cheer on those in power ... I do not always agree with her views and vice-versa.

“But it would be a dull world if we always agreed with each other.”

So, Marina, I may well disagree with you but I’ll certainly be there to defend you despite, and indeed because of, our disagreements.

All labels, whether liberal, moderate, conservative, religious and secular are legitimate and deserve protection as well as respect as long as they likewise respect the rights of others.