

VIEWPOINT

NEW SUNDAY TIMES: It would be wise for families to learn to live without domestic helpers

No end to maid issue

THE outlook continues to look bleak for prospective employers of foreign maids. One would have thought the matter had been resolved when the first batch of domestic helpers arrived following Indonesia's decision to lift the freeze on maids to Malaysia last year. But all is still

not well. There just appears to be no end to the Indonesian maid imbroglio. Perhaps, what we have failed to see thus far or comprehend is this — our neighbour is just no longer keen to continue keeping up the supply. It's curious why we continue to remain in this state of denial when Indonesia has made its stance very clear; it has even unveiled a 10-year roadmap to stop Indonesian maids from working abroad. Securing an Indonesian maid — the cheapest form of domestic help — these days is difficult. Malaysia is not the only nation wringing its hands over the dearth of domestic helpers and other maid-related issues. The going is tough for other countries, too. All the challenges aside, there is one other more difficult to surmount, in Malaysia at least — ensuring the one already welcomed into your home does not flee with everything, from the kid to kitchen sink. It may have happened to a friend of an aunt or the neighbour of a colleague, but these are not exaggerated flights of fancy. Many Malaysian households have experienced all this and more. Rarely is an employer fortunate enough to have the same maid for longer than a few months, or be completely satisfied with her expertise, skills and behaviour.

Under these circumstances, it would be wise to do what we should have done a long time ago — learn to live without domestic helpers. Easier said than done, but there are those who have tried, and lived to tell the tale. Without maids, we would no longer have to live with the spectre of them fleeing, leaving the baby wailing and unfed, or recoil when they are diagnosed with tuberculosis or a sexually transmitted disease, after being certified with a clean bill of health.

A better solution to help ease domestic workload would be better support for mothers at the workplace. Malaysia's rapid growth has led to the proliferation of double-income households, where both spouses have to work to make ends meet. Consequently, childcare support at the workplace would be extremely helpful, if not necessary. Unfortunately, such support continues to be sorely lacking despite repeated calls for companies to institute flexible working hours and set up creches.

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Make online users more responsible

USING SOCIAL MEDIA WISELY: Too many lies, insults and abuses have been perpetrated online, but nobody has been hauled up

LIKE it or not, governments around the world are grappling with how to deal with social media, which presents new rewards and risks for governments far beyond the changes brought by traditional media such as television and newspapers.

From Cairo to New Delhi or London, social media is changing the way people organise themselves and express their views on issues.

In one recent outburst against social networking, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan described Twitter as society's "main menace", saying it is full of exaggerations and lies.

Now, with almost everyone free to tweet or post a picture on Facebook, the advent of social media is posing new challenges for online privacy for citizens, companies and governments.

The Web 2.0 revolution, in fact, has enabled hundreds of millions of people to publish, share, mix, comment and upload media to a more dynamic online environment.

On the upside, such platforms provide governments with new capabilities and opportunities to directly engage and communicate with the public in a faster and a more cost-efficient way.

In Malaysia, the recent case of several Facebook users allegedly putting up slanderous posts against the Yang di-Pertuan Agong has reignited a raging debate on how Putrajaya should deal with social media and its possible abuses.

Following a huge public uproar, two Facebook users surrendered to police on Friday while another person has been detained and is being investigated under the Communications and Multimedia Act and the Sedition Act.

Yet, nearly a week after the alleged offences took place, no charges have been brought against any of them.

The authorities' ability to act decisively and swiftly against Net offenders will go a long way towards ensuring the people's confidence in upholding the rule of law in this country.

If I recall correctly, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia



Malaysians love to post on Facebook or tweet, but should remember that they have to be responsible for them

Commission (MCMC) had summoned 15 people just before the recent general election over the dissemination of false news and defamation via text messaging.

They apparently had spread false news that there would be chaos on polling day.

One wonders what has happened to these cases now that elections are over. I am sure there are many such pending cases over the last few years gathering dust at MCMC.

Malaysians love to post on Facebook or tweet, but we should remember that access to the Internet is not a right. It is a privilege and one has to be responsible for each posting.

Singapore, for example, has gone a step further by imposing a licensing requirement on news websites that provide regular reports on Singapore and have significant reach on the people. Ten sites, each with at least 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore every month, will be licensed and will have to put up a S\$50,000 (RM124,000) performance bond.

"Like our regulations in the physical world, our regulations for online space are meant to ensure that people are responsible for their actions, which have real-world consequences," Singapore's Communications and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim said last week. "These are actions that should not be condoned, whether online or offline."

He stressed that the Singapore licensing move was not aimed at limiting public discourse. He said New Zealand and Britain were also reviewing their regulatory approaches and frameworks for new and traditional media.

MCMC should study how regulators in other countries deal with Internet abuses. More importantly, it should also work with the police and the attorney-general in trying to plug any legal loopholes in bringing culprits to book.

A Jalil Hamid
is NSTP group
managing editor



While we may not necessarily follow the Singapore example, MCMC should study how regulators in other countries deal with Internet abuses. More importantly, it should also work with the police and the attorney-general in trying to plug any legal loopholes in bringing culprits to book.

It should also encourage Internet service providers to step up their surveillance and tighten terms and conditions of usage for Internet users.

There should also be greater emphasis on educating Net users to exercise self-regulation. More companies should also institute social media policy in their workplace.

MCMC or the police should act without fear or favour. There have been too many lies, false news, insults and abuses perpetrated for too long on the Internet, but yet no one has really been hauled up for these wrongdoings.

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VIEWPOINT

NEW SUNDAY TIMES

Parenthood is fast becoming an unreachable dream

Setting the price for children

WITH exception to “the one per cent” and those who have their needs paid for by the public purse, it is impossible for ordinary adult Malaysians not to feel the pinch of the rapidly escalating cost of living. In fact, the use of the word “pinch”

in relation to economics may have to be boarded out, because the reality for many is more like an amputation. While in the past it was possible to not only dream, but also reasonably expect to own a home, now, and possibly forever after, home ownership will remain only a bitter dream for many. As the *New Sunday Times*' cost of living series has shown over the past few weeks, more Malaysians are finding it harder to make ends meet.

Faster than it takes a wage earner to calculate whether he or she can afford to buy an apartment unit or house, the costs go up; so much so that the only way to catch up is to run 50 or 100km out of town. This, many people do, and then spend much of what is supposed to be quality social and family time commuting between home and office. It is an impractical solution. The reality for many, however, may be that they will live out their lives as renters, not owners. And even then, inner city space is fast being cleared up to make way for high-yielding luxury condominiums. For the ordinary Joe, it could feel very much like the economy is conspiring to squeeze one out of life altogether.

But when it gets to a point where thrifty couples cannot even realistically afford having one child, that is when life starts getting pointless. Not that children have ever been cheap. Indeed, conceiving a child should be a well thought out and calculated event. The issue of affordability is far more serious than that of a housing mortgage because with children, there is no possibility of a shortsale. (Unfortunately, “repossession” can occur in instances where children are undernourished or due to accidents caused by lack of supervision.) There are many things that a person can learn to forego: a car, house, fine dining, expensive jewellery. But most humans are hardwired to produce offspring — parental desire being an important survival mechanism, even though there is currently no risk of the human species going extinct.

Would it be a good thing for people to start looking at progeny as a luxury possession? Children are usually seen as “precious” any way, and, like it or not, human life does have a price. That manifests itself in the hidden costs of living a decent life, like paying more to live in a safe area, eating nutritious meals and getting quality education. Without a doubt, family planning is vital. But it will surely be a sad day when parenthood goes up for auction.

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Lessons from Egypt upheaval

RULE OF THE PEOPLE:

Democracy should not be an end but a means to achieve greater good

THERE have been a series of paradoxes in a volatile Egypt. Firstly, an 18-day-old revolt spearheaded by the young people of Egypt ousted president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.

In Cairo's Tahrir Square, the epicentre of the popular uprising, tens of thousands leapt to their feet, bouncing and dancing in joy on news of Mubarak's ouster.

“Lift your head high, you're an Egyptian,” they had cried. Repeating the tense of the revolution's war cry, they screamed: “The people, at last, have brought down the regime”.

Then in the last two months — in a bizarre twist of events — we saw a seemingly democratic movement urging the military, which backed six decades of the autocratic rule by Mubarak, to topple a democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi, who succeeded Mubarak.

The political turbulence in the post-Mubarak era in the most populous Arab country could be described as the proverbial “out of the frying pan, into the fire”. Egyptians' taste for democracy proved to be short-lived, falling back into the trap of the powerful military.

The euphoria over the downfall of strongman Mubarak soon fizzled out as Egyptians lashed out against Morsi's government over soaring food prices and rising unemployment.

“Liberal” political parties, upset by Morsi's leadership that tried to forge ahead with his government's Islamic agenda, then decided to join forces with the military to topple his Muslim Brotherhood's supremacy in Egypt.

The secular-liberals, who had earlier failed to make much inroads in the country's elections, found it politically expedient to join hands with the generals to oust the Brotherhood government.

With Morsi arrested and his power seized, his supporters had retaliated with massive protests in Cairo and other big cities. The protests turned yet into a bloodbath on Aug 14, when armed police stormed thousands of the Brotherhood's supporters and peace-



A protester helping a wounded comrade as security forces clear a sit-in in Cairo on Wednesday. More than 500 people have been killed and 3,000 injured in the violence in Egypt. AP pic

ful demonstrators camped beside a mosque and a university in Cairo.

In the ensuing mayhem, more than 500 people were killed and nearly 3,000 injured with the violence spreading to other cities, including Alexandria and Suez and a score of churches were burned down. A month-long state of emergency was declared across the country.

The bloodbath, over which Malaysia and other countries have expressed a deep regret, has plunged Egypt into deepening chaos and emboldened the brutal military regime that showed little or no interest at all to put the country back on the road to democracy.

The Wall Street Journal said the events on Aug 14 showed that Egypt could be heading into a “murderous civil war” that could be a tragedy for the country.

The generals' worst mistake, however, is to ignore the chief lesson of the Arab Spring, *The Economist* wrote. “This is that ordinary people yearn for dignity. They hate being bossed

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VIEWPOINT

NEW SUNDAY TIMES: Respect for transport safety requires firm authority

Institute stricter measures

WHO in their right minds would want to ride in a stage coach or express bus in Malaysia? If only going by the averages, buses might be taken to be "fairly safe". But, given that these buses can almost always be seen to be zipping along highways in the fast lane, and most accidents involving them are due to poor maintenance, excessive speed or overworked and sleep-deprived bus drivers, riding in them is a lot like playing Russian roulette. That many people still do is simply because they cannot afford anything better.

Many allegations have come from the recent Genting Highlands bus crash: that the bus driver had failed the bus company's compulsory test, and yet had been given the green light to drive the challenging route anyway. That the onboard sensor's emergency alert had gone off, and the driver had called it in, but had been instructed to continue driving. And that this company's drivers average eight trips a day, six days a week, working nearly 15 hours a day, of which a full 12 is spent driving.

Unfortunately, recording the authorities' reaction is becoming quite tedious. "High-level probe", "stepped-up enforcement", "task force", "special investigation committee" and "leave no stone unturned" are all very good phrases to use in the aftermath of a fatal crash; but, as history has shown, eventually the stones will be allowed to gather moss

once again. It's all very well to say that the authorities cannot regulate everything, but surely there must be some industry standard by which everyone must abide? If the allegations regarding the company prove true, then the authorities must step in and institute stricter measures, instead of leaving it to businesses to self-regulate.

The Land Public Transport Commission's chairman has made a distinction between "roadworthiness" and "crash-worthiness" — and about time, too. On paper, the bus cannot be deemed to have been overloaded, because its maximum capacity was for 45 seated and 20 standing passengers. But, doesn't it defy logic for a bus going downhill along various dangerous slopes to have standing passengers? What is the point of a law if it has no function? The authorities are never short of good ideas, but back-track and flip-flop too easily when faced with objections and mutiny from industry players. In the past, there have been suggestions for buses to install black boxes and speed limiters, passenger seat belts and cabin electronic surveillance. But, their implementation have not been successful after bus drivers and operators found ways to override the system or just ignored them. For as long as the authorities do not stand firm when implementing an unpopular measure, public transport safety will remain an optional luxury, and express buses but merely speeding hearses.

... the authorities cannot regulate everything, but surely there must be some industry standard by which everyone must abide?

Steering Malaysia out of headwinds

HIGH FISCAL DEFICIT:

Policymakers must at the same time maintain prudent but pro-growth financial measures

OVER the last few months, Asia's economy has suddenly lost some shine after several years of strong growth that surpassed much of the rest of the world.

The regional economic picture deteriorated further in the past weeks. Last week, Thailand's economy shrank unexpectedly in the second quarter, slipping into a mild recession on weak exports and domestic demand.

India is battling its worst economic crisis in decades. And in Indonesia, the government announced on Friday a slew of measures to stabilise the economy, following record current-account deficit, weaker-than-expected economic growth and with the rupiah at a four-year low.

And in China, Asia's powerhouse, its economic growth slowed in the second quarter to 7.5 per cent year-on-year as weak overseas demand weighed on output and investment.

Is the party over for Asia? For several years, Asia's bright economic spots — China, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand — have been growing faster than the region, driven largely by foreign investments and fiscal stimulus packages.

But things have since changed. "The music has stopped playing," according to Frederic Neumann, a co-head of Asian economics at HSBC. His bank had last month cut its growth forecasts for Asia (outside of Japan) to 6.1 per cent for this year and 6.5 per cent next year. It had projected 7.2 per cent growth for both years.

The rupiah and some other Asian currencies have been facing fierce sell-offs in recent weeks on mounting concerns that the US Federal Reserve is poised to start unwinding its super-easy monetary policy.

There seemed to be widespread capital outflows from Asian emerging markets back to the developed markets, such as the United States, as investors from those markets cashed



Bank Negara Malaysia Governor **Tan Sri Zeti Akhtar Aziz** at a news conference at the central bank's headquarters in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday. Malaysia's **current account surplus** fell sharply in the second quarter because of tumbling exports and higher imports. **Reuters pic**

Having learned lessons of the 1997/98 crisis, economists say Malaysia is now in a better position to face any financial crisis. And for the most part, Malaysian companies are in a stronger position.

A Jalil Hamid is NSTP group managing editor



the economy cooling off, there have been renewed concerns that the region will be vulnerable to economic crisis again like the 1997/98 Asian financial crisis.

Can Malaysia and the region withstand the risk contagion this time around?

Having learned lessons of the 1997/98 crisis, economists say Malaysia is now in a better position to face any financial crisis. And for the most part, Malaysian companies are in a stronger position. The turmoil is unlikely to herald imminent collapses or spark defaults.

There are a few strong factors in favour of Malaysia's economy.

FIRST, Malaysia has strong foreign exchange reserves, which stood at US\$137.9 billion (RM455 billion) as at Aug 15. The reserves position is sufficient to finance 9.6 months of retained imports and is 3.8 times the short-term external debt. For comparison, the reserves stood at just US\$70.5 billion as at end-December 2006

SECOND, our banking system is well-capitalised. Banks have also put in place a thorough risk-management system. There are also better access to key macroeconomic statistics to help banks and companies make informed decision.

THIRD, Malaysia has low inflation (which stood at 1.8 per cent in June) and relatively low interest rates, unlike in India and Indonesia.

Indonesia's inflation accelerated to the highest level in more than four years to 8.6 per cent in July, adding to risks for the economy as growth cooled.

out their Asian assets, including bonds and equities.

Stocks in Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam tumbled more than three per cent last week from a week earlier amid the sell-down in the emerging markets. Jakarta stocks fell 8.7 per cent on the week, its worst since September 2011.

There are views that things can get worse as the outflows gain momentum, putting further pressure on the region's economy.

With the Asian currency and stock markets running into turbulence and

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