Greeting the new year with a resolution to combat injustice

TYPICALLY, we greet every new year by reflecting on the outgoing year and making resolutions for the new one. What did we achieve last year, and what lessons can we learn from it?

For many, 2023 was a wake-up call, a year of change. Among others, we had to come to terms with the overt presence of artificial intelligence (AI). Will AI dehumanise us? That is the question.

In greeting the new year, I would like to reflect on the most vulnerable human experience we witnessed in 2023 – the war in Gaza. The plight of the Palestinians is constantly present in our subconscious, but it is blurred by other distractions.

The Palestinians, like many other people in war-torn countries, became dehumanised; they became numbers, reported in the news, to be pitied for a while before our attention shifts to other things.

When discussions within society consistently portray marginalised groups in a certain light, their humanity is diminished, their exclusion and mistreatment normalised.

The real danger lies in this process of normalisation. Derogatory or dismissive language, when commonplace, dehumanises groups completely. Everyday language perpetuates enduring stereotypes related to race, poverty and immigration, quietly undermining empathy and understanding, paving the way for acts of discrimination and violence.

The normalisation of language that perpetuates acts of injustice, racism, and marginalisation goes beyond high-profile conflicts or issues; it seeps into our existence.

When discussing the homeless, the sick, refugees or foreign workers, we tend to reduce them to stereotypes or statistical data, preventing us from recognising their humanity and understanding the complexities of their situation.

This normalisation extends to areas like gender discrimination, where sexist language downplays problems such as harassment or inequality, making effective solutions more challenging to pursue.

Normalised dehumanising language doesn't just impact those directly affected, it also shapes society's compass by diluting our empathy and diminishing our sense of justice.

This normalisation is particularly evident in conflicts like the war in Gaza, where the language used by media that support the aggressors often downplays or conceals acts of aggression by those in power, thus framing our interpretation and subsequent reaction to the situation.

What happened last year, though, stopped us from thinking of the Palestinians as merely numbers. Through social media, we were confronted by images of the atrocities of war, of houses and schools and hospitals being bombed, and children and babies killed senselessly in what is clearly an attempt at genocide.

The dead were not just numbers; they had names, faces, stories. One was someone I knew well – Dr Refaat Alareer, a writer, critic, poet, professor of English, and my former student at Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Refaat was one of the many unjustified deaths that happened due to extreme injustice. He once said to me that "injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere." The profound weight of his words made me reflect on how we must remain concerned with and invested in combating any form of injustice, anywhere.

Refaat, whose words became his weapon, wrote untiringly of the situation in Palestine. He remains undefeated in death, as his words live on to speak for him, to combat and challenge narratives of injustice.

His last poem, "If I Must Die", has become a beacon to the Palestinian cause, calling attention to, and continuing to tell "his story" and the stories of many other Palestinians in occupied Palestine, as well as others around the world who suffer from any form of injustice.

May his legacy live on, and may the people of Palestine find justice and peace.

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