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7th in the Bernama series to mark the 50th anniversary of Umno
UMNO UPHOLDS THE SOVEREIGNTY OF BAHASA MELAYU

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KUALA LUMPUR: " ... Bahasa Melayu should be made the national and official language of this land... for a nation cannot be truly sovereign without its own language being sovereign."

These is the legacy bequeathed by of the late Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein when he was the Education Minister in the cabinet of the country's founding father, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The establishment of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in 1970, 13 years after the independence of Malaya or seven years after the formation of Malaysia, was an early but major step taken to realise the testament of Tun Razak. This is because UKM uses Bahasa Melayu as its medium of instruction.

It cannot be denied that the birth of UKM is a result of the struggle of the Umno leaders and the Malay intellectuals and some academicians, besides the Malay teachers unions.

For instance, when Tun Razak was the Deputy Prime Minister, he played a vital role to bring about the realisation of the national university.

No doubt it was several Malay intellectuals who took the lead to clamour for the unviersity. Among them were Prof Zainal Abidin Wahid, Prof Abu Bakar Hamid, Tunku Shamsul Bahrin, Zain Abdul Majid, Dr Ghazali Abdul Rahman dan Syed Hussin Ali.

However, it was Umno's role that was vital because it sparked off the political will that influenced the government to give its commitment to set up the national unversity, that is also the zenith of excellence of the National Education Policy, based on Bahasa Melayu.

Although history would show that there was some misunderstanding over the proposal among the Malay leaders, including those in Umno, the cudgel was picked up by some radical leaders like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Syed Jaafar Albar, Syed Nasir Ismail, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Encik (now, Tan Sri) Musa Hitam, and the deputy head of the Ketua Kaum Ibu UMNO, Puan (Tan Sri) Aishah Ghani.

In this connection, several meetings had to be held over the proposed university. This included a meeting participated by representatives of students' unions, undergraduates, teachers, lecturers and Malay intellectuals at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka on the night of Aug 25, 1968.

That meeting resolved that a national university must be set up and a pro-tem committee was set up to effect the resolution. The committee was chaired by Syed Nasir Ismail, with Dr Mahathir as a vice president.

Given the strong support of the people, especially the teachers' unions, the Umno Political Committee held a special conference on Sept 4, 1968, to discuss the proposal.

Among the members of the committee were two vice presidents of Umno, the late Tun Dr Ismail dan Encik (now, Tun) Ghafar Baba, and a member of the Umno Supreme Council, Dr Mahathir.

The conference decided to ask Umno and the government to back the concept of the university, which was set up in May, 1970. It was called Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

Now, some three decades later, UKM has scored two obvious achievements -- producing thousands of capable Bumiputra graduates and enhancing the standing of Bahasa Melayu as a language of management in the various sectors of the country.

Upto last year, UKM has produced 43,515 graduates, 1,324 Masters and

110 PhDs, 2,094 medical doctors, 276 lawyers, 696 engineers, 1,836 in business administration, 1,075 in accounting and 416 medical specialists.

There were skeptics who had questioned the quality of the graduates. But these doubts were put to rest when the UKM graduates showed their capabilities by heading multi-national corporations or as doctors, engineers, analysts or financial advisers.

It is pertinent to note that when UKM had successfully proven its capability, other local universities began to emulate by adopting Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction for most of their courses.

This indirectly provides a bigger opportunity for students from the Malay medium to pursue higher education at the university level, which was monopolised by those from the English medium.

The end result was that more than 150,000 Malay students had graduated to date, with Bahasa Melayu as the main medium of instruction, said the secretary of the Malay Intellectual Congress (KCM), Prof Datuk Wan Hashim Wan Teh.

The UKM graduates were duly recognised by foreign universities, from the US, Australia and the United Kingdom which accepted them readily for post-graduate studies, and most of them eventually came through with flying colours.

Wan Hashim, who is a UKM lecturer, said the university initially experienced a serious shortage of academic staff.

"We have to resort to tutors from the UM, and in some cases even from Indonesia to assist us," he recalled.

"Some of us who at that stage were still pursuing our oversea studies also played some roles in influencing lecturers from the foreign universities to (serve UKM)," he added.

Wan Hashim also said that the objective of the National Education Policy had been significantly achieved.

Before the '70s Bumiputras accounted for only five, or, at best, 15 percent of the university graduates, and even then, they were mainly from the Arts stream. However, things began to improve, particularly since the '80s when the number of Bumiputera graduates increased to an extremely encouraging level.

"These are the core group that helps the current nation-building process," he said, adding that many of them became the technocrats and corporate citizens of Malaysia.

The most extra-ordinary achievement, in this respect, was the emergence of Bumiputera academic staff in the local universities. During the pre-1970s, the number of Malay lecturers were negligible, besides being limited to the teaching of Literature, Malay Studies and probably History and Geography.

"In contrast, between 80 to 90 percent of the present academic staff of our universities are Malays. We are now dominating the intellectual field, so to speak," Wan Hashim said.

Meanwhile, an UMNO veteran from Malacca, Datuk Borhan Md Yaman, said the idea of establishing a national university in Malaya used to be the basis of the struggle of the Association of the Peninsular Malay Teachers Union (KPGMS) as early as the 1940s.

Borhan, who was the Malacca UMNO secretary under the chairmanship of Tun Ghafar then, said with the implementation, after the Independence, of the Razak and the Rahman Talib Education Reports, which became the basis for the National Education Policy, the question of establishing a national university became more than relevant. -- Bernama