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Chamber can help build up pool of Malay entrepreneurs

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CONGRATULATIONS to Tan Sri Tajuddin Ramli, chairman of Malaysia Airlines, for being unanimously elected the next president of the Malaysian Malay Chamber of Commerce at its 32nd annual general meeting on Saturday.

While his earlier reservation of accepting such a heavy responsibility is understandable, given his already heavy corporate responsibilities, the chamber needs a man of such standing to take it into the next millennium.

Tajuddin, I am sure, is aware of the challenges facing the chamber, which in turn are challenges to his leadership. Top of the chamber's agenda will surely be the need to help create successful middle-class Malay entrepreneurs.

The lack of a significant number of middle-class Malay entrepreneurs is already recognised in the Government's economic blueprint, the Seventh Malaysia Plan, and the need to establish clear strategies to achieve this objective has been repeatedly highlighted by Prime Minister Dauk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Towards this end, perhaps the chamber's role is not only to help identify potential candidates but to give every possible assistance to those who aspire to be in that group. The chamber, through its members list of illustrious captains of industry, at the very least should be able to provide the necessary motivations to encourage risk-averse candidates to take the plunge in establishing themselves as middle-class entrepreneurs.

There is nothing like listening to successful entrepreneurs and businessmen on what the actual business world is like than being told by those who have not been a businessman, even for a day.

The risk-adverse characteristic of the Malays is perhaps one of the major deterrents to ensuring that a sufficient number of middle-class entrepreneurs exist today. The successful policy of ensuring that Malays attain a high level of academic achievement did not necessarily translate into more of them turning entrepreneurs.

For most of them, after securing whatever graduate or post-graduate qualifications, the trend was to be an employee, but not to start up a business. The comforts of a secured job certainly discourage a great majority of educated Malays with perhaps half the necessary qualifications to start a business.

For others who may aspire to be entrepreneurs, the lack of capital and the difficulty of getting started, such as getting a loan from a bank, are enough to dampen their interest. Only those who are prepared to lose everything they have will persevere. And the number of such individuals is not high.

Perhaps the chamber together with the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development will be able to identify potential candidates who have dreams of becoming entrepreneurs in fields they feel competent in. They can encourage such people to come out and take the risks, not to be guaranteed success but to be given the support needed to get started.

Contacts with banks and financial institutions, for instance, is an important link in ensuring that a business get started. Try proposing something to a bank that does not know you and there is a high degree of probability your proposal will never see the light of the day. Pass it through somebody who has the right contacts, and it will at least be given an evaluation of viability by the bank concerned.

Even having years of experience working in an established organisation does not guarantee that a viable proposal will be a success. Sometimes an individual may have the relevant technical knowledge to start a business but lacks the necessary knowledge in management. This is where the chamber can work with professional training organisations to equip such individuals with the relevant knowledge.

The presence of individuals in the chamber who head corporations capable of generating numerous business opportunities to other individuals is a strong point. The matching of these opportunities with capable individuals is one of the more important tasks which may be considered towards achieving the objective of creating a pool of Malay middle-class entrepreneurs.

The problem is that in some cases, such as in construction, there is still a lack of capable individuals even just to complete a job. This is not a new problem. It has been around since the New Economic Policy was established, but nothing much has changed since then, as shown in the recent statement by Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed.

Now the country is in the midst of implementing its programme in information technology. The establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor is a strategy of survival for the future. Of the 900-odd companies which have registered to start operations in the MSC, very, very few actually are companies wholly owned by Malays, whether as individuals or as a group.

The emphasis given to high-tech companies as the companies of the future to reduce our dependency on labour and to make the nation more competitive deserves special attention by the chamber.

Soon a new exchange to encourage the development of high-tech companies will start operation. Mesdaq, or Malaysian Securities Dealing Automated Quotations, is targeted at low-capitalised high-tech local and foreign companies to give Malaysia a boost in high technology.

What will be listed from among the Malay enterprises on this exchange?

Perhaps this is also something that the chamber can give serious thought to, along with steps to ensuring a higher stake in the equity market, especially in the already established Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange, the Kuala Lumpur Options and Financial Exchange, and the Malaysian Monetary Exchange.

Tajuddin will certainly like to see the effective translation of whatever plans he intends to implement for the chamber through an effective secretariat and bureaus.

I remember receiving a letter from one of the heads of such a bureau sometime ago with very promising objectives. But since receiving that letter, I have not received any notice of a meeting. Granted that those appointed to head such bureaus (if the bureaus are still the style of the day) are very busy people, perhaps the secretariat can act as a monitoring unit to ensure that lofty ideas are at least turned into moderate actions.

Once, I was invited to present a half-day talk on "How to Get Listed on the Stock Exchange", a topic most training outfits charge a hefty sum for participants to attend. The talk was attended by only a dozen members. The chamber, I was told, has no less than 3,000 members.

Excuses such as lack of sufficient publicity were given but the lack of participation was proof of the lack of interest.

Whatever the direction the chamber wishes to take in future, I am sure effective leadership is only part of the ingredients. The burden of ensuring that the chamber succeeds in its future undertakings lies as much on the shoulders of its members. Perhaps they should at least look around them to see how other chambers of commerce have mapped out their

strategies to be successful.

(This article represents the writer's personal views).

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