

23/03/1997

Ensure only genuine MoUs are signed

A. Kadir Jasin

WEDNESDAY'S Cabinet decision requiring Malaysian companies which intend to sign memorandums of understanding or agreements with foreign parties to carry out business ventures abroad to register with the Malaysian embassies in the respective countries is applauded.

They are also required to register themselves with the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority or the Malaysian External Trade Development Corporation (Matrade) stating details of their business proposals.

Speaking to the Press after the weekly Cabinet meeting, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said the move, which took effect immediately, was to ensure that the MoUs and agreements signed are fulfilled.

This was reinforced on Thursday at the meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and visiting Mozambique President Joachim Alberto Chissano.

Dr Mahathir said at the meeting that developing countries should verify with Malaysian embassies or missions before they sought the services of Malaysian companies to ensure that such companies were bona fide.

In recent years, many Malaysian parties have voiced concern over the apparent lack of scrutiny and monitoring of such agreements which are usually signed in the presence of Dr Mahathir and other senior leaders during their official visits abroad.

They have warned the Government of the danger of associating itself too freely and closely with the signing of such documents by Malaysian companies and corporations.

Through this column, I have as early as 1993 noted that too many Malaysian companies, corporations and businessmen seemed to be signing MoUs in the presence of Dr Mahathir and his counterparts during these visits.

Noting that scores of such documents were signed during Dr Mahathir's 1993 visit to China, I made the following remarks in the June 20, 1993 column: "In Beijing on Tuesday, he (Dr Mahathir) witnessed the signing of more than 30 memorandums of understanding between Malaysian and Chinese businessmen.

"Many important businessmen had their pictures at the ceremony published in Malaysian and Chinese newspapers with the Prime Minister in the background.

"I am quite sure many of these pictures will end up on the walls of boardrooms and executive suites of many companies in Malaysia. The MoUs may even push up the share prices of some companies on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange.

"When the brief excitement of being in front of the cameras is over, the hard work begins. It is then that they have to make sure that the Prime Minister's good name and his friendship with the Chinese leaders are not abused."

Rafidah, in her Wednesday's Press conference, said out of 363 MoUs and agreements known to the Government, only 186 were in the various stages of implementation.

In my May 1, 1994 column, when commenting on Dr Mahathir's visit to Zimbabwe, during which he was honoured with the request to open the country's international trade fair in Bulawayo, I wrote:

"But I sense that some Malaysian businessmen are not showing full appreciation for this and have the tendency to misuse, or even abuse, their association with the Prime Minister.

"I am not talking about those who invited him to open their factories or witness the signing of bona fide joint venture agreements. I am referring to those who quite openly use the Prime Minister's presence as a publicity gimmick to push up the prices of their shares or lend legitimacy to what is otherwise a questionable deal.

"There had been instances where such projects and memorandums of understanding failed to get off the ground because they were not properly thought out.

"We cannot expect Dr Mahathir to know or to be fully briefed on all the projects, agreements and MoUs that he was invited to launch or witness.

"It is the duty of the businessmen to ensure that what they are signing or launching in the presence of the Prime Minister is above board and will not bring his good name and reputation into ridicule at a later date.

"Beyond that, it is the absolute responsibility of his aides, especially those responsible for determining his daily schedule, to ensure that such invitations are thoroughly scrutinised."

In the Feb 16 column, when commenting on Dr Mahathir's advice to Malaysian businessmen to be careful when investing abroad in order to avoid being labelled greedy, I said:

"In their enthusiasm to invest abroad, Malaysian investors should always bear in mind the importance of preserving the country's reputation.

"Dr Mahathir may not mind gracing ceremonies where memorandums of understanding or letters of intent are vigorously signed by all and sundry. But we have to recognise that his reputation is as much at stake as those of the signatories.

"With the Prime Minister preparing for another hectic year of international travel, it is wise for people responsible for planning and executing his trips to examine closely invitations to such ceremonies.

"I think the habit of some businessmen of catching the Prime Minister or his officers by surprise at lunch or dinner to request him to witness a hastily arranged signing ceremony should be stopped."

With Mida, Matrade and the foreign missions taking over the vetting of MoUs and investment agreements, it is hoped that only the genuine ones will be signed during the Prime Minister's visits abroad and during the visits to Malaysia by foreign heads of state and governments.

The argument that MoUs are required before proper negotiations can be started should not be used in a manner that will jeopardise the good name of the office of the Prime Minister and the country.

THE Western Press and critics often condemn the media in developing countries for allegedly taking sides in an election, usually in favour of the ruling party.

For this reason, they often portrayed elections in the developing countries as unfair and their outcomes as questionable. In so doing, they ignore the stark reality that their own media is often less than partial. In fact, while claiming to be independent and impartial, their newspapers, radio and television stations are often blatantly partisan.

The most recent example is the public announcement by Britain's largest newspaper, the tabloid The Sun, that it is throwing its support behind the Labour Party in the May 1 general election.

Hours after Prime Minister John Major launched Britain's longest election campaign in 80 years by confirming that polling would take place on May 1, The Sun described his ruling Conservative party as "tired, divided and rudderless".

The Sun, which is owned by Australian-born media magnate Rupert Murdoch,

went on to campaign for Labour's Tony Blair, saying that the British people need a leader with vision, purpose and courage who can inspire them and fire their imaginations.

"The Sun believes that man is Tony Blair," it proclaimed.

The Sun, which sells more than four million copies a day, boasted after Major came from behind to win the 1992 election that its support had tipped the balance. "It's The Sun Wot Won It," it crowed then.

More British newspapers are expected to make their stand, either blatantly like The Sun, or more subtly as the election campaign progresses.

Already The Scotsman has stated that it was not supporting the Conservatives. Its editor-in-chief Andrew Neil stated his newspapers stand in an interview with Channel Four television.

During the same interview Andrew Marr, editor of The Independent said hardly any newspapers still enthusiastically back the ruling party. NATIONAL Literary Laureate Datuk A. Samad Said's Lantai T. Pinkie is a powerful play that many Malaysians who grew up in the post-World War II years can at least remember if not identify with.

Although it was set against the free-wheeling Singapore of the 50s, the story line is familiar to most people in Malaysia who grew on the diet of funfair and joget.

It tells the story of a joget girl, T. Pinkie (real name Tengku Siindahkuno played by Tiara Jacqueline) whose tragic life was all too familiar in the world of the entertainment workers of the day - a subject favoured by Samad in his work. (Remember the tragic life of prostitute Salina in his definitive novel of the same title?)

But in Lantai T. Pinkie, which is written for the stage, Samad goes beyond storytelling. The three-hour play, which was presented by the Utusan Melayu Group at Matic from March 15 to 21, is loaded with messages and commentaries not only of the period but beyond.

Built around the principal character T. Pinkie, the play tells the tragic life of a dance hostess who was the product of a single parent and sexual abuse. T. Pinkie literally grew up on the dance floor (referred to by Samad as lantai), became a joget girl and was kidnapped by her gangster patron who married her, abused her and gave her a daughter.

T. Pinkie was the representation of the marginal people who led a neglected and abused existence in the closing days of colonialism. They were the people who did not matter much to the British, Dutch and Japanese colonialists as they fought to defend their dying empires.

Then there was Nyai Sunarti Renko (Erma Fatima), the lovesick Javanese mistress of a Dutch planter Tuan Delarosa, who came to Singapore in search of her hairy-chested, smelly but kind-hearted colonial master. She was the embodiment of the generation that had accepted colonial subjugation and abuse as takdir (preordination) and the White race as superior.

The future was represented by servant girl Puteh Su Abdullah (Marlia Musa) who had all the confidence in the future of her nation and in the wisdom of her own people through her determined courtship of the harsh but wise retired boat captain, Jongkidin Jaroi (Ahmad Yatim), whom she called Wak Merdeka.

The dialogue is varied, ranging from the bawdy talk of joget girls and musicians to love, history and philosophy.

Muhairi (Hani Mohsin), the accordian player, made a considerable effort to convince T. Pinkie of how great her bottom is and that every man had a craze for it and Nyai Sunarti spent a considerable length of time recalling in vivid detail her lovemaking to Tuan Delarosa.

Wak Merdeka and Muhairi, in his old age, spoke of history and philosophy that shaped their life and time.

The monologue was Shakespearian - lengthy and powerful - some lasting 10 minutes and more. Here, players like Erma and Mazlan Tahir (playing the role of Muhairi in his old age) excelled with Tiara and Hani coming not far behind.

The only part I felt slightly overdramatised was the closing scene when Muhairi related the tragic death of T. Pinkie in a crossfire between the British forces and the Indonesian intruders during the confrontation.

Samad told me later that psychologically he was deeply affected by konfrontasi.

The praise for the excellent presentation must also go to director Rosminah Mohd Tahir of the National Arts Academy and the Utusan Melayu for its sponsorship.

With more and better cultural infrastructure being developed by the public and private sectors, including the Panggung Negara (National Theatre) which is under construction, the country needs more quality material and talent to fill the gap.

(END)