

13/03/1997

Essential to find the right stewards

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MUCH has been said and written about Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad's fatal accident. Many newspaper column centimetres were given to reporting the unfortunate helicopter crash. And there were too the necessary obituaries, eulogies and comments about the man himself and the immediate impact of his death.

Naturally, praises for the man poured profusely from many sources, but there was the odd remark which inferred, albeit obliquely, that without the Prime Minister's support, he would not be the man with the Midas touch.

As an ordinary member of the public, I knew the late Tan Sri only through Press reports and of course the grapevine. Therefore I see myself, in this instance, as an impartial observer of the human condition.

It is my assumption that when the PM picks an individual out from a crowded field of hopefuls, all of them of immense calibre, this particular person must be, in the PM's estimation at least, someone of exceptional ability. Surely we are not expected to believe that the PM's choice is based on whim and fancy alone!

In the case of Yahaya, whose meteoric rise could not fail to capture the public's imagination, I presume that the criteria for the PM's decision was a straightforward matter of his relevant knowledge, proven business acumen and his unequivocal sharing of the PM's vision for Malaysia.

For most of us, myself included, the foresight that has taken the country to where it is now within a very short space of time is pitted with danger. There is, for example, the Proton venture. (A more appropriate example, in this case, one cannot hope to find.) This has proven to be nothing less than an adventure, and a good one at that.

I am sure that many had doubted the feasibility of this ambitious project and I for one still do feel that as an average middle-class citizen the price for me has been a little too high. However, apart from my selfish concern, Proton is arguably the watershed of the country's entry into developed nation status.

Granted that we have ahead of us a long and arduous journey but the Proton venture has given us the mileage we needed in a world of nothing but economic challenges. A nation's sinking or swimming rests on its ability to meet these challenges well!

Notice, too, that Malaysia is no longer denigrated as a mock democracy simply because the PM is unforgiving in his pursuit of success, for Malaysia especially, and the developing world in general. It is now almost impossible to find criticism of the PM in the international Press that once was prone to accusing him of being a dictator. Why? Because the fruits of his labour are too real to deny.

Malaysia has full employment and plays host to the unemployed of our neighbours. Foreign workers come to this country not because the oil money has made Malaysians indolent and indulgent. Rather, they are here because there is just not enough of us to fill jobs that are truly economically productive.

My contention then is that ambitions that defy established economic theories pushed the PM to look for the truly gifted - a person who could go beyond what we who profess to be well-educated see as sacred and therefore should not be violated. The late Yahaya, however, respected the ability of the human mind and will to push the frontiers of knowledge

further and proved that even well-serving theories can be tweaked to allow for the success of exceptional endeavours.

For instance, when he, with the PM's blessings, decided to salvage Lotus Group International, the international financial Press lauded it as a clever manoeuvre to bring Formula One technology to Malaysia's car industry. Proton is now set to enter the high-end car market. Malaysians were instead needlessly worrying that this move might be more folly than wisdom.

It is such a pity that his untimely demise robs the industry of an informed stewardship for the man epitomised one of those rare occasions when convergence of appropriate knowledge, vision and business acumen occurs in one single person.

Understandably, therefore, many jumped to unfortunate conclusions when there was a slight delay in announcing his successor. (What with the trading of the counters under Yahaya's group of companies being suspended on the KLSE.) Don't they know that even where corporate ownership structures are clearly delineated boardroom arguments and fights make for delays?

In Malaysia privatisation is not a simple exercise of giving over to the highest bidder what is a public enterprise. Here the move to privatise is a calculated risk, one which could be unmentionably tragic if things go wrong. The Government wishes that the undertaking will grow but no longer feels that it is appropriate to place this kind of pressure on public coffers. Hence, private ownership. This places on the government the burden of a stringent monitoring function.

Yahaya did not buy out the public but rather the public through its leaders have entrusted him with nurturing further and taking the enterprise to greater heights of achievements. In our privatisation exercise therefore our leaders cannot tolerate any possible failure.

Not unnaturally, then, time was needed to search for the most suitable successor to inherit this massive public trust. A person with an ability profile closest to the deceased would be the most preferable. It is not that there is insufficient Malay business talents because we all know that there is a pool, nay, a reservoir of them all over the country.

It is more because the automobile industry of the country is already well established. But it is an industry that exists in a highly competitive international environment. The wrong stewardship could actually mean disaster for the country and could bring our carefully nurtured economy to its knees!

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