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Harmonious, shared destiny of multi-racial Malaysia

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HARVARD: Malaysia has been in the news in recent weeks. The sudden interest and the increased coverage on Malaysia has been prompted by the currency crisis and the Government's and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's response to it.

This coverage, in the foreign media, can perhaps be equated with the wide coverage that Malaysia was given during the 1969 riots. Even today, any article or feature on Malaysia is not without reference to the May 13 incident. Malaysians may have left the unhappy episode behind them and moved forward with their lives but foreigners will not forget it, nor will they allow anyone to do so.

Despite the negative and adverse reports on Malaysia, there are still many supporters of the nation, foreigners who "know" Malaysia better than to believe the adverse foreign media reports. Without a doubt there are also sceptics who like to think in terms of worst-case scenarios.

But the gathering of academics and scholars at the Harvard Law school saw many admirers of Malaysia's courage in speaking up. Harvard Law School's Islamic Legal Studies Programme, headed by Mr Frank Vogel in collaboration with the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim), provided a platform for discussions on Multi-Religious Malaysia: Governance and Islamic Jurisprudence".

"The ethnic structure in Malaysia is built for war. But there is very little war in Malaysia," Professor Daniel Lev, Professor of Political Science, University of Washington, Seattle, said.

On the other hand, he noted that "accommodation" in Malaysia has worked better than any other in South East-Asia. While there are "conflicts", he said the country has been able to channel them onto "safe paths".

Speaking at a day-long seminar, he attributed the superb handling of the situation in Malaysia to "very effective institutions and the elite" who are capable of facing the changing situation.

He noted that Malaysia is the only country that has "firmly, capably and efficiently" dealt with the affirmative action plan or the New Economic Policy "so successfully".

Drawing on the durian to illustrate his point, Professor Lev said the the "accommodation" in Malaysia is typified by the thorny fruit. The fruit, "the size of a football", he said, divides the world into unique camps. The division is based purely on those who adore the fruit and those who do not, and not on religion, ethnicity, race or colour. But despite these differences "there is very little war" in Malaysia.

A member of the audience who has done considerable research and study on the region pointed out that the Malaysian speakers, in painting a rosy picture of the country, had actually "downplayed its achievements".

The country had a much more difficult position at independence than Sri Lanka. Before independence, the different races were at odds while in Sri Lanka the people were basically united and fought against the aggressors during the war. But today the differences and developments in the two countries are very stark.

The peace and racial harmony in Malaysia is in sharp contrast to the internal strife and discontent in Sri Lanka. The difference, according to him, is due to the fact that Malaysian leaders got down to work on the "problems" very early while in Sri Lanka they got to work on the issues "very, very late".

The pragmatism and maturity of Malaysian political leaders and elite, from among the various races who knew each other, has given the country a tremendous boost and also provided for political and economic stability.

The close working relations, the tolerance and respect for each other's culture and beliefs among various races have confounded many outside the country who do not understand the underlying traits and strengths of the country.

An African-American who lived in Malaysia for three years with her four children told the seminar that in trying to analyse Malaysia, one cannot rely upon the usual cultural explanations. These, she said were "inadequate".

She and her children were not discriminated against in Malaysia, a foreign country to her. But as an American, her children have been subjected to and felt "racism" in America, which she calls home. Thus there is more to Malaysia and Malaysians than meets the eye and the "culture" cannot simply be reduced to what political analysts generally do.

While there were many who spoke in praise of Malaysia, there were also opposing views and many questions. These included those relating to independence of the judiciary; freedom of the press; religious tolerance - and the banning of Al Arqam was cited as an example where the government was said to be intolerant; and the more recent developments on the currency front and the move to "blame" foreigners for it.

The African-American, in speaking up for Malaysia, said that perhaps Malaysia "learnt from America". She pointed out that during the Cold War America blamed "someone else" - the outside world and Russia - for most of its ills.

Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji, Chairman of Ikim, together with Professor Kamal Hassan, an Ikim board member and a visiting Professor for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown, explained that the banning of Al Arqam did not represent nor does it in any way reflect religious intolerance in Malaysia. Al Arqam was a deviationist sect and the government moved to deal with it peacefully and without violence and loss of lives.

The US authorities have had to crack down on deviationist cults and movements several times and in one instance in Wako it was not peaceful and led to a shootout and many deaths.

As Professor Kamal said, Malaysia is unique and while Malaysians can be proud of the success and achievements, the leadership and the elite have not been lulled into complacency and have admitted that "we do not deny that we have problems".

It is the realisation and awareness of the Malaysian landscape and the need to cater to the different needs and demands that have enabled the political leadership and elite to remain tolerant and formulate policies that benefit all.

Ahmad Sarji said not only has the dominant political party, Umno, not ignored the interests of others and its willingness to consider the needs of other parties, the country is more democratic than it has been given credit for.

The country's success formula, for example, is based on the needs and wants of multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-ethnic Malaysian society. Quoting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, he said: "You cannot give each one everything that he wants because it involves taking something from someone else.

"...There must be sacrifice on the part of the non-Bumiputeras, and therefore some unhappiness. But the Bumiputeras will not get and will not be given all that they consider their right..."

The Malaysian success story has not been fully told nor explained.

Despite the recent currency crisis and decline in the stock market, the country's political stability remains unaffected. The economic fundamentals and stability remain intact.

While there has been speculation that the slower economic growth will give rise to racial tension and suspicion, Ahmad Sarji said the success of the NEP and the shared interests of all Malaysians irrespective of race, religion or ethnic backgrounds bind them together even much more closely.

Today there are joint ventures between the Bumiputeras and non Bumiputeras just as there are joint ventures between Malaysians and foreigners. This shared and mutual interests will work to further strengthen and unify Malaysians of all races to face the challenges posed by the currency crisis.

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