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Leapfrogging from prosperity to pits of social ills

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I HAVE been on "holidays". If anyone has noticed. I still am, notionally. I write this letter from home, where I have been riding the heights and plumbing the depths of an emotional roller-coaster - of pride, trepidation and despair of a booming Malaysia.

It's a ride on which I had been transported even before the rush of emotion on landing, as the practised voice of the MAS chief steward intoned over the intercom: ... "dan kepada penumpang-penumpang Warga Negara Malaysia, Selamat Pulang."

On the MAS Boeing B747-400, seated with a Karachi-bound systems analyst, I learnt more than I had expected, on a subject that had perplexed me: what was all that fighting about in Karachi?

I learnt they were the same dynamics afflicting Indonesia, spilling over into the sporadic outbreaks of rioting that I'd been reading about days earlier.

They were expressions of economic deprivation from which we in Malaysia had learnt well in May 1969, and the consequences of which we have since worked to avoid with firm economic policies.

I wished my Pakistani travel companion, Saleem Arif, would take the Malaysian experience to his fellow Karachi-ites. The pride welled in me to learn that what I had been telling him had confirmed what he had learnt from the World Bank, surfing the Internet after he learnt he was to fly through Kuala Lumpur.

In the time I have been home, the pride has been reinforced by the development evident everywhere, not least in the remote communities opened up by the North-South Expressway.

Stepping off the aircraft and into Immigration, I hadn't given second thought to the disinterested reception of the woman officer. It was barely five in the breaking dawn, after all.

Now, after all that I've been reading since, about the lack of social grace that has come with Malaysia's runaway economic success, it reminds me of that first encounter almost 20 years ago at Hong Kong Immigration that swore me off the arrogant Hong Kong Chinese. (I am told they're much better these days, humbled no doubt by the sobering imminence of July 1, 1997.)

Between the mood swings of pride and despair, I am discomfited by the trepidation over the social ills expressed by the Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues.

It seems the identification of race by economic function eliminated by the New Economic Policy has been replaced by the identification of race by social affliction.

There is consensus on the observation of the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, that the Malays are most vulnerable to the social ills of dadah addiction, sexual promiscuity, bohsia, lepak, child abuse, incest and domestic violence.

Expressions of concern of this social affliction, and attempts at national action, are encouraging. The emphasis, however, I fear, is open to misinterpretation, thus leaving us open to barking up the wrong tree.

The national conference at Pusat Islam, confined to heads of the Malay leadership, and the calls to action to the Islamic spiritual leaders, puts a greater onus on Islam - and religion - than I suspect is justified.

The causal factors of the social ills, I believe, has less to do with

religion than are sociological in nature. That more of the youth vulnerable to the social ills are Muslim is a function of a sociological coincidence that in no way can be taken to be a commentary on the virtues of Islam and/or its practice.

To lay emphasis on Islam is to render us blind to what is essentially a sociological phenomenon. Neither is the Malay ethnically predisposed to these social ills.

Well documented among the root causes of these ills are the social consequences of rural migration and rapid urbanisation in late-developing societies, not least those of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Malaysia.

It's only in the recent past that this phenomenon has come to be seen in the context of globalisation and the communication revolution that has blossomed in tandem. This context has yet to figure in the Malaysian debate.

The fixation thus far has been on identifying the internal weaknesses in social structures. Yet it is implausible to suggest that Malay(sian) parents have degenerated to the point of negligent adoption of a lackadaisical attitude towards their children. It defies human instinct of parental care.

For all the success of the New Economic Policy, there is a social cost that is now unravelling. The youth whose social habits we are now beginning to despair of are children of the times, left to their own devices in an historical time when technological and telecommunication advances are rendering them exposed to the heights of global influences (read: American).

The question is posed often enough: Malay and Chinese youth are exposed to the same influences. Why is the Malay more vulnerable?

I suggest a sociological explanation rooted in economic change.

To the credit of the New Economic Policy, it has produced a class of entrepreneur that has leapfrogged traditional processes of development. The economic benefit is plain to Saleem Arif.

What is not so clear are the social consequences of the dominant free-enterprise model of global capitalism. The model is ultimately individualistic, at odds with the traditionally formed Chinese business built on collective principles of the family.

Traditional Malay society is no less built around family values of the common good, but these have been compromised by an acceleratedly acquired business culture that emphasises rugged individualism, the negative aspects of competition, and the pursuit of material profit.

Freedom is fundamental to this culture. Translated into our social setting, this freedom tends to mask the common values held by traditional societies.

My colleague Rose Ismail writes of the conspicuous consumption of what she calls the middle and upper-middle "crass class". Husbands and wives have little time for their children, leaving them in the care of surrogate parents in their hired help.

While immediate measures involving official sanctions limiting the movement of the young may serve short-term goals (there are many, I have gathered, prepared to argue otherwise), the long view suggests we may be addressing the wrong audience.

What punk hairstyles and home-boy outfits are to the youth, the Cartier watch and diamond ring from Tiffany are to Rose Ismail's datins and puan sris. Teenage fad is no more taboo to the young than the shopping excursions of their parents in New York and Paris.

The American ethicist Richard T. De George, in his book Business Ethics, writes of America's wealth undermining the industry and thrift exemplified in the Protestant work ethic, and replacing it with profligacy and the

desire for the easy life.

The same re-examination of social values is taking place in much of the early-developing West, including Australia.

The new rich in Malaysia may be imparting those same flawed values to their children.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in his book The Asian Renaissance, calls for spiritual and cultural renewal to mitigate the economic excesses of global capitalism.

In the way De George argues against the Myth of Amoral Business, Anwar expresses the hope for economic growth based on balanced and holistic development, one guided by ethical and social concern.

Genuine renewal, Anwar is convinced, must involve a moral renewal.

The key to resolving Malaysia's social ills is for parents to lead by example.

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