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Loyalty, betrayal: Then and now

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CERTAIN names from history stick in the mind and are used these days in the media and in political assemblies to mock those with the same character. Thus the epithet "quisling", synonym for traitor. And Brutus, to indicate the conspirator who betrayed and stabbed his close friend.

Reams of copy were written and speculations rife when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad once mentioned Brutus in his speech before the UMNO General Assembly. In another assembly two years ago he reminded members to beware of conspiracies by such as "si-Kitul" which led to the fall of the old Malacca sultanate.

Mentioned in the recent UMNO Assembly by Youth leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was the name "Patih Karmawijaya" whose intrigues in old Malacca caused the downfall of Hang Tuah. The Malay warrior was accused of sexual liaisons with the sultan's concubine and was forthwith sentenced to death.

Reciting history Zahid said the conspiracy occurred at a critical time when the services of such as Hang Tuah were needed for the survival of the sultanate. He had then asked: "Is there a Patih Karmawijaya in the party now conspiring to bring about the fall of our leadership and Government?"

The story of Hang Tuah has been retold in A History of the Peninsular Malays by R.J. Wilkinson, British Resident in Negri Sembilan (1910), considered one of the expatriate officials who showed a common concern for the Malays. Described was the epic duel between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, two old friends, ending in the death of the latter. Quote: "Hang Tuah lost his kris and was given time by his opponent to pick it up and to continue the combat on equal terms. The opponent then dropped his own weapon and asked for the same indulgence. Hang Tuah stabbed him. When reproached for lack of chivalry he replied that chivalry was out of place with traitors to their king".

A variation of the theme of conspiracy is the tale of Sang Rajuna Tapa, the traitor who betrayed old Singapore to Javanese invaders. Noted was the reason for his act of treason - that his beloved daughter was publicly impaled on suspicion of infidelity to her lover the sultan.

Thus was also the tale of the attack of the swordfish and of the city being saved by the boy. Wilkinson wrote: "Yet in all this mythical account there is a suggestion of tragedy. The story of the swordfish ends with the ominous words that the blood of the boy - who saved the city and yet put to death lest his cleverness should prove a public danger - rested upon the island as a curse to be wiped out in days to come".

Recurring in the Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals) is the theme of loyalty. Recounted was the advice given by Sultan Mansor Shah of Malacca to his son Husain that life was only a preparation for eternity and that the sultan's subjects "the root by which he lived" would pronounce the final verdict on his reign and character.

Historian Barbara Watson Andaya in her monograph "The nature of the State in 18th Century Perak" quotes also from the Malay Annals. Described was the oath "taken by the ancestor of all Malays to the first ruler; their oath ever binding unless the ruler unjustly hurt or humiliated his subject... if he flouted this command, his kingdom would be destroyed, not by men, but by God".

Problems arose, therefore, through acts of wilfulness, arbitrariness and injustice by certain rulers. As when Hang Tuah in consequence had to choose whether to be loyal to his old comrade or to regain the favour of

the ruler who had once sentenced him to death.

Among questions posed then is whether in the circumstances the way was paved for the coming of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British.

The theme of loyalty recurs also in works by Hugh Clifford, British Resident and later High Commissioner for the Malay States in his *At the Court of Pelesu and Other Malayan Stories*.

In the story of Pelesu there is the contest between the sultan and the young British political agent. The latter's loyal followers were Malays and among them was one Raja Haji who had "won for himself an astonishing reputation for courage, for invulnerability" and who had earlier fought against the British.

For over three hundred years then the country was colonised till the coming of colonisers from the East itself, the Japanese, to be followed by re-colonisation by the West.

There was the paradox then that those who co-operated with the Japanese were jeered as "collaborators" and those who stuck with the British were praised for their loyalty.

All of which, after 40 years of independence, brings back the question posed by Zahid about a modern Patih Karmawijaya conspiring as in days of old. Of his target of intrigues, however, could it not be said as suggested by a political commentator: if your friends stab you in the back, you will hardly feel the kicks of your enemies.

May you grow in strength.

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