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Mongolia in the throes of change

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has many heroes. The first, for obvious reasons, is Prophet Mohammad.

He also has great admiration for Peter the Great.

In more recent times, the Dr Mahathir, a voracious reader, has been studying the history of Genghis Khan.

A few weeks ago, at the close of a Press conference in Mongolia, he candidly spoke about these great men and the lessons they offered humankind.

"They tell us that unity brings strength, that determination results in great achievements.

"They have shown us that relatively backward and nomadic people can be brought together to create huge empires covering, in the case of Genghis Khan, almost two-thirds of the known world at the time.

"Look at how ignorant the Arabs were before Prophet Mohammad united them. The same can be said about Peter the Great," he said.

Dr Mahathir's views on heroes and icons - well-known to several Malaysians in the delegation to Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan earlier this month - came as a surprise to Mongolian reporters at the Press conference.

Many of them were already in awe of his leadership style, observed Hulan Ganchin, a 25-year-old Mongolian who attended several functions organised for the Malaysian delegation.

"But when he started talking about Genghis Khan, the reporters were very excited."

Ganchin said the 13th century warrior was very important in Mongolian society.

"He is our hero," she said in halting English. As a child, the first stories she heard on her grandmother's lap were that of Genghis Khan or, Chinggis Khaan, as they call him here.

Yet, for more than six decades, when Mongolia was a Soviet vassal from 1924 to 1990, the warrior was swept into obscurity. Moscow apparently feared all vestiges of national pride but the older folk, Ganchin said, managed somehow to pass on to young Mongolians fascinating (and sometimes, incredulous) tales about the revered leader.

According to legend, after his father died, nine-year-old Temujin (the name given to the young Genghis Khan) provided for his family who lived on the edge of starvation.

Yet, before he died in 1227, he succeeded in subjugating millions. Where there was resistance, he pillaged and plundered and where there wasn't, he demanded taxes and troops.

Historians say the empire established by Genghis and his sons and grandsons was so great (in 1288, it stretched from the Yellow Sea to the Mediterranean) that it was exceeded only by the British Empire of the 19th century.

Looking at Ganchin as she tucked stray strands of brown hair behind delicate-looking ears, you wouldn't think she has descended from tribes which ruthlessly conquered large portions of the world in the 13th century.

Back in Ulan Bator for a late summer break from Berlin where she is studying business administration, Ganchin looked far too refined to devour the raw livers of slain foes - a gruesome ritual practised by her ancestors during the time of the great warrior.

"The stories we hear about Chinggis Khaan tell us that Mongolians were once a very strong people.

"Now," she said after a long pause, "Mongolians are strong and sometimes... not so strong."

Genghis Khan would have been displeased with this somewhat diffident assessment of his people but Ganchin may be right.

The political, social and economic transitions taking place in Mongolia today have brought to surface a frenetic desire to "make it" without taking into consideration, as some claim, the strengths and values embedded in the society.

There is, for instance, a fast expanding area of seedy nightclubs in Ulan Bator which several Malaysian delegates inadvertantly (they said) strayed into some evenings when we were there.

According to Bayaraa, a political activist and former journalist, the nightclubs are frequented by expatriates and tourists so Mongolians hang around these places knowing this is where the money is.

Both he and Ganchin also despair at the sight of young Mongolians spending their leisure hours listening to rap music.

"This may be a good way of learning English," said Ganchin, quite unconvincingly.

In fact, all things Western have pervaded this Stalinistically-planned city of 600,000 people.

The biggest culprit appears to be cable television. According to Enkhbat, a member of the Mongolian Chamber of Commerce, 85 per cent of his people in the city have cable.

"It has become a necessity. Even if they can't afford anything else, they have to have cable," he added, almost apologetically.

This was patently obvious when Malaysian reporters visited one home close to our hotel. The family members were watching a replay of Princess Diana's funeral service on one of two huge television sets in the two-bedroom apartment.

Intriguingly enough, the apartment block wore the look of disrepair from the outside but inside, Zoright, 36, and her two young sons, Erdene and Bat-Zorigh, had a washing machine, fax machine, coffee maker, an electric heater and fryer, a rice cooker and a new fridge.

Zoright, a lab assistant, said her husband was "a boss in a small diamond factory" - which explained the bigger purchasing power of this family.

As Bayaraa pointed out later, few families had such luxuries.

We also noticed that Zoright and her sons watched a great deal of MTV which means that they would know as much about Boyzone and Spice Girls as they would traditional Mongolian music.

Equally popular are Hindustani movies on television.

Along with this preoccupation with all things un-Mongolian is the craving, as Ganchin puts it, for "money, money, money".

After a long stretch of Soviet-style rule which erased almost entirely the creative and enterprising spirit of the people, this sudden shift towards making money is not surprising.

With cable insistently telling Mongolians that they have been deprived for so long, the desire for change is inevitable.

But what kind of change do they want?

Dr Mahathir's message to countries like Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan was clear: the changes in Malaysia's economic profile did not happen overnight. Attitudes and mindsets had to change. A sense of urgency had to be inculcated and failures, he said, should be regarded as challenges for future improvements.

Certainly, there is no room for failure in the eyes of the Mongolian

Government but if mechanisms for change are not convincing enough, not far-reaching enough, if the people themselves don't understand why they have to change in order to ride along with changes in their society, the leaders may have difficulty pushing reforms.

Bayaraa, a member of the National Democratic Party (one of two parties in the governing coalition), said he was worried that short-term setbacks would have a negative effect on the fledgling political system.

"People want more and they want it fast. But I sometimes think the Government is not doing enough to tell them that it must come gradually, that certain structures have to be set in place before things can really get better."

As it is, the country has embarked on a radical privatisation plan aimed at jump-starting the economy.

Latest reports indicate that virtually everything owned by the State will be auctioned off within the next two years and this, for whatever cash they can raise from the sales.

The State is not only engaging in fiscal reform, it has also abolished tariffs, making Mongolia the only country in the world to levy no import duties.

Despite this, getting investors to seriously consider doing business in Mongolia, perceived as remote and isolated, is difficult.

Still, individuals like Bayaraa remain quietly optimistic.

"Things will not be good this year and next but the Government has a vision to stop economic instability. By 1999, we will be okay," he said confidently.

Even so, it seemed clear to us as we toured the city on frightfully chilly evenings that very few knew how to achieve that state of okay-ness.

Crumbling infrastructure and pervasive unemployment are two major stumbling blocks.

The few shops we saw were pathetic indeed. Looking for fine cashmere cardigans, we instead found stores where cans of Coke, bottles of dish-washing liquid, boxes of imported cigarettes and plastic clothes pegs were carefully arranged and displayed under glass counters.

The people, by and large, looked stoic but they also watched us with polite curiosity as we dashed around the capital in a motorcade headed by the two leaders.

In fact, Malaysians who made contact with Mongolians liked them immensely.

"There is a certain innocence about them. Too bad we are going to help spoil all this," said one businessman.

And, although we may be stretching it to insist that Ulan Bator is the aesthete's ultimate destination, there is something captivating about this city with its wide boulevards lined by silver birches now turning brilliant shades of yellow and brown as the land prepares itself for winter.

Indeed, if there is any reason to come here it would have to be the natural environment. The countryside is, without doubt, magnificent.

The wide, open plains, the rolling hills around Ulan Bator, the blue skies (even during the heart of winter) and the crisp and clean air would calm and invigorate the most tired of souls.

In some way, all this will naturally be affected as Mongolian society seeks its way desparately into the moneyed folds of capitalism.

Already, the grim face of Genghis Khan appears on vodka bottles in the airport duty-free shop.

And, it won't be long before the great warrior gets acquainted with the cheerful but vacuous grin sported by Ronald McDonald.

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