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Let's start the Great Malaysian debate

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N.H. Ishak is one of the many people who wrote in after my last article (What I Tell You Three Times Is True) was cunningly published directly next to the object of its disdain The "Bullish on Bouncing Back" advert.

Though no one will believe this, it turns out that that juxtaposition was completely coincidental proving, if proof be yet needed, that the Malaysian gods have a highly developed sense of irony.

I know nothing about N.H. Ishak aside from his name (and by inference his race) and the fact that he clearly cares passionately and thinks deeply about his country and the problems it faces. His email prompted a response, to which he responded further and so on.

So, for what it's worth to the many other Malaysians who love their country and are concerned about its future, here is something that perhaps we need more of, a public exchange of views on public issues, Malaysian style.

NHI: I thought it was a good idea that we start rebutting predictions of doom and gloom by foreign economists, experts and analysts with our own counter-analysis, theories by our own experts and counter-arguments by some of the more elite and prominent CEOs. This does, however, beg the question whether it is conducive to the Malaysian situation as a whole if our experts and CEOs start to (possibly) contradict the signals sent out by the powers-that-be.

AED: Or even if the powers that be start to contradict the powers that be, for example, some of DPM Anwar's reinterpretations of Dr Mahathir's statements...I don't, however, necessarily see a problem with differing views, even at the highest levels. We are confronted today with complex and wide-ranging problems, which admit no easy solutions. A survey of the financial Press quickly leads to the conclusion that nobody anywhere in the world, not economists nor policy-makers, has a monopoly on a correct solution.

The IMF has made contradictory statements as to whether hedge funds did or did not play a central role in the depreciation of Asian currencies last year. Bill Clinton is a supporter of the IMF and is seeking to push a Bill through to replenish its coffers, a Bill the Republicans in Congress are keen to block. Analysts insist that the Asian crisis will affect Western markets, but the US and London share indices continue to rise (at time of writing anyway, three days later who knows...)

The point being made is that in this era of Brave New World economic paradigms, of fluid currency movements, and of complex intertwined social, political and economic structures that pervade much of East Asia, there is plenty of grey area between the poles of right and wrong. (Which is not to suggest that wrong no longer exists, corruption is wrong, prejudice is wrong, and policies which encourage or ignore such stances are also wrong). In such an environment, informed, open and thorough debate is crucial not simply for Western PR purposes but so that sensible action can finally be taken.

A debate that must include not only those in government, but those whom the policies will affect, and those who are in a position to be impartial: the public and their representatives in a democracy, the Press, and academics and outsiders.

That debate will obviously contain differing, even violently opposing views, but it is only through that exchange, through such a crucible of

argument, that a consensus can emerge. That, after all, is the key concept behind democracy, involvement, inclusion. What should matter are the ideas, not who is voicing them.

NIH: I think the problem is that we tend to do it in "private"...whinging about something is different from trying to take measures to identify the core of the problem and to collectively attempt to come up with a solution. If we believe that any of the arteries provided by the Malaysian political system are choked up by the "fat" of patronage...then I suppose, we should at the very least attempt to move public opinion from their hidden cynicism and apathy towards the whole matter, to some sort of constructive participation in national problem-solving.

AED: Absolutely, and I think the moving of that debate into the public forum is now finally possible. Possible for three reasons:

1. Through the mediums of a developing local Press and widely available world news through satellite, cable and the Internet, we now have an ever more informed public and one who is no stranger to the idea of public debate, even if only through the Larry King show.

Information is freedom, or as Thomas Jefferson, rather better, put it: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilisation, it expects what never was and never will be"; Malaysia is far from ignorant and it wants its freedom, its Merdeka.

2. People are worried. Things have never been quite like this before. The combination of the economic crisis with the fires in Borneo and the continuing haze, and now a water shortage and unbearable temperatures make it hard not to feel that a country you built is slipping away from you.

And when you are concerned, and you hear the world telling you that it is a result of the policies of your leaders, you need, for your sanity, to question.

3. Most importantly, I believe that both our Government and our society have evolved to the point that such debate can take place without leading to crackdowns, breakdowns or shoot-ups. Perhaps I live up more to the OP than to the PESS, here, but the truth is, that unlike Indonesia, the strain on our wallets has yet to result in seismic rifts between the communities. To be sure, there are harder tests ahead, but I choose to hope, as you do, that we will pass those tests. Perhaps even this little exchange between a Bumi and an Indian is a vote of confidence in our shared Malaysian identity.

NHI: My own opinion of this present crisis is that it is a turning point...the same one we faced in 1957 and 1969. It will leave a lasting implication on how we Malaysians (and the next generation) will decide as to how the road to 2020 should be re-tracked or followed at all. It may be an economic disaster for the next two to three years or so, but I think that in the long run, if we really use this opportunity to do a major re-think of what we should have done and what we shall do in the future, it might be the best thing that's ever happened to us in the long run...Let's think of it as a great big opportunity to reform ourselves...God willing...

AED: God helps those who help themselves, perhaps we should think of this little session as a prayer...

* Continue the Pessoptimist debate! Write to the New Straits Times or email: arvind@pessoptimist.clara.net. E-mail will be posted on the webpage: www.pessoptimist.clara.net

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