

22/04/1998

Meeting of best and brightest

Abdul Razak Ahmad

SOMETIMES the greatest of ambitions, so improbable at first, can come true - for those audacious enough to envision it, that is.

Take the case of the two young Malaysians who were selected to participate in an international student meet in Thailand last year. The annual conference, organised by the Harvard Project for Asian and International Relations (HPAIR), seemed a perfect avenue to widen their horizons and exchange ideas and views among their peers.

As it turned out, however, one of the intended participants, Shahrizan Lockman, was unable to attend. He had been accepted by Universiti Putra Malaysia and had to attend the university's orientation programme instead.

So he did what any passive, ungrateful, lecture-note regurgitating, uncritical, and unexpressive young Malaysian would: he e-mailed Harvard and wrote a proposal to UPM's vice-chancellor explaining his improbable wish: that the next conference be held in Malaysia.

The vice-chancellor was immediately smitten with the idea: an international conference attended by the top students from the world's best universities, and practically organised by and for young people.

The proposal was handed to the university's AIESEC (the French acronym for L'Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales, an international association of economics and commerce students which is probably the world's largest student-managed education association.)

Soon after, John Um, chairman of HPAIR, came to check out Malaysia as a potential venue and the ambitious young man involved.

He liked Malaysia and its "insolent" young person, but he felt he needed more - insolent young people, of course. The International Malaysia Forum was roped in.

The IMF, by the way, is the creme-de-la-creme of Malaysia's undergraduate community, a loose grouping of about a hundred of the best and brightest of Malaysian students studying locally and abroad, and spoken highly of by one of the previous year's HPAIR conference speakers, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir.

The host country organising committee (HCOC) was thus formed. Consisting of UPM's AIESEC and IMF, their task was to formally bid for the conference, with the full backing of UPM and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies.

Once the bid was secured, the HCOC would have to undertake the unenviable task of organising the conference, from start to finish.

So that's how a bunch of audacious young people are now at the helm of the biggest international student conference ever to be held in Malaysia.

The numbers are impressive: distinguished professors and about 190 students from the world's leading universities with 50 local participants to boot.

To be officiated by the Prime Minister, the conference, to be held in Kuala Lumpur at the Putra World Trade Centre from May 28-31, also provides for dialogue sessions with not only the world's leading academics but the Prime Minister himself.

Furthermore, the conference findings will be presented before regional leaders at the upcoming Asia Pacific Roundtable Conference.

The HPAIR 1998 conference theme, "Asia in Transition: Beyond the Miracle", might at first seem formidable, but stems from the queries which

is at the forefront of every young person's mind nowadays.

Questions like "Oh why can't we get scholarships and jobs because of the current slump which is due to so many unsubstantiated theories which go as far as the teh tarik stall" can now go all the way to a dialogue session with the Prime Minister and renowned figures like Harvard Professors Jeffrey Sachs, Samuel Huntington and Ezra Vogel.

As an added bonus, participants get to argue their views and findings with the better part of 190 students from universities like Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge - to their heart's content.

"Actually, there's nothing new about the choice of topics," said Zarina Nalla, a HCOC committee member. "The only thing unique about it is that instead of policy-makers and analysts, the participants will be students of the world's institutions of higher learning."

Which leads to a high probability that one day these participants will be the ones in charge of things. According to Shahrman, "with the diversity of views in inter-governmental relations today, this would be training for the world's future leaders to be tolerant of conflicting viewpoints."

With the view that greater understanding and tolerance leads to less future conflict, the conference also aims to combat another malaise which the West seems so incurably afflicted with: the undying belief by a certain country (located north of Mexico and south of Canada) that it is at the centre of the universe.

"Some of the professors at Harvard and Yale are ensconced in their belief that Malaysia's current economic problems are due to corruption, cronyism, nepotism and poor policies," said Ahmad Zaki Zahid, co-chairman of the HCOC.

"The conference is the perfect opportunity to counter this 'tunnel vision' by presenting our side of the case," he added.

"The assumptions made in the scope of topics presented to the HCOC by Harvard was condescending," said Shelina Razaly Wahi, the HCOC's second co-chairman. "They had a particular bias in their assumptions of the causes of the current economic slowdown," she added, "and as such, this would be the opportunity to answer our critics."

Imagine that. A call to arms by a bunch of upstarts barely in their twenties. Such ambition. Whatever will these insolent youngsters think of next: one day taking over the country, perhaps?

* The HPAIR organising committee welcomes private and corporate sponsorship for local participants. For enquiries and applications, contact Shahrman Lockman at 03-2547737, e-mail: moshe@tm.net.my, or visit the International Malaysia Forum website at <http://www.ethos.com.my>

(END)