

22/11/1998

Malaysia an evolving society

A. Kadir Jasin

THE old Malay saying *sekali air bah, sekali pasir berubah* compares life to the flow of the river.

Each time the river overflows its banks and floods its surroundings, it reshapes its banks and alters its direction.

This reflects the way the Malay society adapts to changes and new experiences.

The more profound the experience, the greater the change.

When the British proposed the formation of the Malayan Union in 1946 that would reduce the power of the Malay Rulers, the Malays revolted, nationalism was given a boost and Umno was born.

The Malays, and later Malaysians, are practical people. We know that only individuals, communities and nations which are able to reshape and reinvent themselves will survive.

Ours is a fine example of a nation that is constantly and continuously reinventing itself. We are what we are today because we are willing to adapt to changes.

But we do not change for the sake of change or because Albert Gore Jr said we must change. We change in order to give a better life to our people.

And we are able to change, and mostly for the better, because we have a workable political system.

Backed by a well-crafted institutional framework, we have been able to carry out even the most difficult and unconventional changes.

Our popularly elected Government is supported by civilised, caring and law-abiding citizens who do not take to the streets to solve problems.

And when they do, it is always in a legal and peaceful manner.

Those who took to the streets illegally or resorted to violent means had never won.

They caused death and destruction, and in time met their own demise for want of support from the silent majority.

The Malayan Communist Party tried it for 41 years. In 1989, it admitted defeat, laid down arms and accepted peace.

Its front organisations, including legally instituted political parties, took to the streets in the fifties and sixties to foment violence and civil disobedience.

They even paraded their dead through the streets of Kuala Lumpur and provoked clashes with police in the hope of attracting public support and sympathy.

They were rejected at the ballot. Some died a natural death while others were shunted to the periphery of society. The Labour Party and Partai Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia were among them.

In the early seventies, university students, aping the anti-Vietnam War movement in American university campuses, organised their own anti-Government protests.

Many of the protesters and their leaders were in fact Malays who would not have tasted university education had it not been for the New Economic Policy quota.

The NEP itself was widely condemned at home and abroad for its alleged discriminatory practices.

Yet today, the core of the Malaysian middle class, whether they are Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans or Kadazans, is made up of people who grew

up during the 20-year lifespan of the policy.

Had our leaders, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad included, decided that being popular with the liberal West was more important than the distribution of wealth, Kuala Lumpur could have been like Jakarta.