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Stable system of government since 1957

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THROUGHOUT history winds of change blow across countries from time to time. The 20th Century will go down in history as the era of most change in systems of governments in much of the world.

It witnessed the rise and fall of communism the end of empires; colonialism giving way to independent Sovereign States: kingdoms replaced by republics and the rise and fall of dictatorship.

The end of World War II in particular saw the beginnings of the clamour for independence from the European powers in Asia and Africa.

In our region, the Philippines in 1946 India and Pakistan in 1947 Burma and Ceylon in 1948 Indonesia in 1949, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1954 and Malaya in 1957 became independent nations.

Most of these countries attained their independence after a spate of violence and bloodshed.

India actually led the way over a long period of agitation for independence from the British Raj which had ruled the sub-continent since the 18th Century. The final thrust of the independence struggle was in the 1940s.

The Indian masses were largely illiterate and the independence movement was led by the educated elite and backed by university students from its 53 universities.

Indeed, the tactics employed by Indian university students at the time for independence of their country were copied by university students of other countries to effect political change in recent times, in Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia.

As a university student in India in the 1940s, I was caught by the flood waters of the independence movement. I had gone to attend the Greek history lecture as usual. The professor was there but I was the only student present in the lecture theatre.

The professor looked at me and said: "Young man, if you know what is good for you, you better join the others outside: I did. A massive student demonstration against the British was in progress.

Eventually I became an active participant. Peer pressure I suppose. I joined the All-India Students Congress and soon became a committee member.

After all my country was part of the British Empire although temporarily occupied by the Japanese Imperial Army at the time.

I had found common cause with my Indian hosts.

Public demonstrations against British Imperialism, the English King at the time also had the title of Emperor of India, was part of parcel of the independence struggle.

There were public demonstrations by the students when Mahatma Ghandi got arrested and sent to prison and another when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was arrested and sent to prison. And on many more incidents that were enough to provoke a demonstration.

Most times the demonstrations started off peacefully but it was a matter of time after rabble-rousing speeches and slogan-shouting, the demonstration would erupt into violence, stone throwing, burning public buses and much else besides.

Once violence broke out the police would arrive to break up the demonstrators. I became quite adept at dodging the Lathi charge mounted by horse-riding policemen. Lathi is a long truncheon wielded by policemen primarily aimed at the heads of demonstrators.

I learnt some valuable lessons from this early experience. Idealistic university students are easily marshalled and led.

Peaceful demonstrations can easily turn ugly and mob rule takes over. There will always be 'outsiders' who have nothing to do with 'the cause' to take advantage of the situation in pursuit of their own secret agenda.

Malaya in 1957 was one of the very few exceptions to gain independence without violence but through peaceful and patient negotiations. This was principally due to the late Tunku Abdul Rahman's princely and gentlemanly way of doing things.

Since then we have had a stable system of government with general elections once in every five years. The transition from one government to the next has always been smooth and peaceful.

When the time came, Tunku Abdul Rahman retired gracefully and was succeeded by Tun Abdul Razak, his loyal deputy of 15 years. On the death of Tun Abdul Razak, he was succeeded by his deputy Tun Hussein Onn.

And when Tun Hussein Onn resigned for health reasons, he was succeeded by his deputy Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the present Prime Minister.

Indeed the succession of prime ministers in Malaysia have been more like that of an heir-apparent succeeding to the throne of a royal dynasty. Let us keep it that way.

The winds of change may be blowing again across Malaysia but let it not be an ill wind bearing anarchy and chaos.

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