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Magazine playing to the gallery

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SOME readers of the American-owned Time magazine said they were upset with its cover story on the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Others were of the view that the Prime Minister should not have given the interview to the publication.

There may be those who read the report who are genuinely upset with the unflattering things said about Dr Mahathir. There may also be others who are putting on a sympathetic face while being quite happy with the negative report.

Time billed Dr Mahathir as "one angry man" on its cover and noted: "Mahathir thinks the West is out to wreck Malaysia's economy."

Typical of a foreign publication, which does not care much if a developing country like Malaysia is blown to smithereens, Time asked: "Can he save it - or only make things worse?"

But before Dr Mahathir's supporters get more upset and call for the burning of the magazine, let me remind them of the penalty for open burning.

It is not worth being fined, and worse still, polluting our environment by burning the magazine. Think of it as the price we have to pay for being a liberal nation that allows foreign publications to enter our country freely.

I wonder if Time and other foreign-owned publications dare to be as damning if the subject is Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's Senior Minister.

If any of Dr Mahathir's supporters feel strongly about the offensive report, they should write to the magazine's editor. I do not even recommend that they stop reading the magazine.

We have to continue reading no matter how unpalatable the reports published by these magazines are because that is the only way to know what others think and say about us.

To begin with, Time is just another Western-owned news magazine which thrives by playing to the gallery.

In December 1996 when the so-called Asian Miracle was at its peak, the same magazine published a cover story on Dr Mahathir entitled "Master Planner - who cares what the West thinks? Mahathir Mohamad is rebuilding Malaysia his way." It praised Dr Mahathir to the skies.

Last October, the same magazine featured Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim on its cover with the headline "Anwar and the future of Asia - Malaysia's number two is the star of a rising generation of leaders, but will Mahathir give him a chance?"

The magazine has been known to be wrong before - about Malaysia and the rest of the world.

Time was among the Western-controlled magazines to predict the anarchy of the post-colonial era. It also gave credibility to the so-called domino theory after America was finally defeated in Vietnam in 1975.

Someone told me that when a container port was being built in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, Time predicted that container shipping would not catch on.

Most of all, we must bear in mind that Time is just another commercial product competing for the attention of customers. If telling a good story sells, surely telling a bad one sells more given society's growing appetite for sensationalism.

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TO be fair to both the magazine and Dr Mahathir, it is important to see beyond the headline and sensationalism.

Time from the outset acknowledged that Dr Mahathir was "the architect and prime mover" of Malaysia's economic progress before it fell victim to the regional currency and stock market turmoil.

This, to my mind, is more than what some Malaysians care to admit as they psyche themselves into a frenzy of sloganeering.

I wonder if those who are so eloquently pontificating on the evil of nepotism and crony capitalism and calling for reformasi are merely echoing the sentiments of the West or have their own agenda.

Speaking in Kuala Terengganu on Friday, Dr Mahathir said such terms were often used by the Malaysian media.

To be fair to the local media, it must be pointed out that these terms are widely used because an increasing number of political leaders, including those from Umno, use them.

Or it could be that some of the local newspapers and television stations have been encouraged to use these terms regularly.

As for Time, it was very guarded when criticising Dr Mahathir's attitude towards the economic crisis. Instead of outrightly accusing him of being in a state of denial, it said he "is widely perceived to be in a state of stubborn denial".

Anybody in his right mind, and who does not seek to be popular by saying only the right things, will admit that not everything said or done by Dr Mahathir was right.

And not even Dr Mahathir denies that there are weaknesses in the country's economic structure.

Long before it became the vogue to talk about mergers of banks and finance companies to create world-class corporations, Dr Mahathir had spoken about the need for Malaysian companies to be big to compete in the rapidly globalising economy.

It was Dr Mahathir who said Malaysia should go beyond producing simple consumer goods based on imported technology, and that Malaysia should trade with as many countries as possible.

Yet some critics and media commentators have belatedly lashed out at him for pushing the concept of South-South co-operation supposedly at the expense of regional co-operation.

And long before Asian currency and stock markets came under speculative attacks, he had warned of a borderless world dominated by global traders and fly-by-night operators.

When it comes to admitting mistakes, Dr Mahathir has repeatedly proven his willingness to do so - a point that did not miss the attention of a Singapore-based economist who was quoted as saying "this guy can make U-turns like no other leader in Asia" by Time.

Yes, he is combative in style, but even Time admits that he is also acknowledged for his substance. It says: "Combativeness is Dr Mahathir's style, familiar throughout the region since he became Prime Minister nearly 17 years ago. It's also his substance.

"The ambitious, take-no-prisoner approach of `Dr M' has transformed Malaysia's politics, race relations and, most spectacularly, its economy."

Surely, Dr Mahathir has every right to be angry and to distrust the West when much of what he and his predecessors have built in the last 41 years was shattered almost overnight by currency traders and speculators.

Time writes: "Before Asia's currency crisis hit last year, Mahathir had built up Malaysia's average yearly income from US\$300 a person to US\$5,000, a legacy few leaders can match."

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THIS is not about defending Dr Mahathir. Neither is it about sweeping

under the carpet the wrong turns that he has taken. It is about defending the truth and about being fair.

Of course, with Dr Mahathir's position being perceived by some to be weak in the wake of the economic crisis, the tendency to blame him for everything that goes wrong is understandable.

This is what the Malays mean by menanggung di air keroh (An English equivalent would be "It is good fishing in troubled waters").

Yes, there had been excesses. But where were the critics and what had they done to stop these excesses?

Alas, in reality many of them were as culpable as the people they are accusing. It is for this reason that even the so-called liberals were prickly when their favourite projects and schemes were subjected to even the most cursory criticisms during the good times.

If there is still fairness in our hearts, let us ask: is it fair to blame Dr Mahathir for the Internal Security Act and the court's decision in the Lim Guan Eng case, as Time did?

What then is the role of the bleeding heart liberals who count among them Members of Parliament and Ministers in these matters?

Ironically, the very same people who want Dr Mahathir to interfere with the independence of the judiciary in the Guan Eng case had, in the past, accused the Prime Minister of not respecting the judiciary.

Yes, we live in a globalised world. What the rest of the world thinks of us is important.

But must this mean that we give up our freedom to speak up against injustices? Must we accept every dictate of the International Monetary Fund, the yuppy stock analysts and Western-owned mass media and keep quiet because we fear what we say may offend them?

And must we pander to the foreign Press because if we are good to them they will say good things about us even though what they say may not necessarily be true?

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POLITICAL ambition and personal interest aside, the more important thing is to stay united and work towards salvaging the economy. We owe more to ensuring the future of the younger generations than to fulfilling the ambitions of a few politicians and businessmen.

It is in this context that efforts by the Education Ministry, Mara and other public and private educational organisations to create more places in universities and colleges, and to make available financial support to the students, are commended.

As more parents and students fall victim to the economic crisis, the widening of doors to higher education and the offer of financial support will be invaluable.

It is also a time for us to think more like Malaysians by giving as much support as we can to all students regardless of their ethnic backgrounds.

With Bumiputera students being given a head start in university entry via matriculation programmes at the various public universities, it is only fair that a more favourable consideration be given to non-Bumiputera students seeking admission to these universities through direct entry.

The same should also apply to the offer of scholarships and official study loans to deserving students.

With fewer parents being in the position to send their children abroad to study, the pressure on the local institutions of higher learning will understandably increase.

But we can consider ourselves fortunate because this happens at a time when the Government has decided on a bold but not necessarily popular move to expand domestic higher education by allowing the setting up of private universities.

We cannot talk about the democratisation of education if we do not begin to apply a more universal, achievement-oriented selection method in determining access to higher education.

This does not mean to suggest that we must abandon altogether the existing policy of helping the Bumiputeras and other poor Malaysians to gain access to tertiary education.

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