

22/12/1999

And what is wrong with staying on?

Zainon Ahmad

AFTER a lapse of six years, I visited Kuching again over the weekend and was pleasantly surprised to see the much changed skyline. In the 1980s, I was quite a frequent visitor especially during the good old days of the power struggle between the "uncle and the nephew".

But much of the sprawling city on the bank of Sungai Sarawak - for chroniclers and poets it is the river of magnificence - is still exuding the charms of an era long gone.

The ambience is still there to fire the imagination of European visitors drawn to the Land of the Hornbills by the romance of the White Rajah and his Ranee lording it over the headhunters.

I lament the fact that a favourite haunt is gone. On the site of the old world Hotel Aurora now stands a spanking Merdeka Palace, a new age structure and a tribute to the cyber age when information travels the speed of light.

Tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the main bazaar but overlooking the Padang Merdeka, the hotel was a beacon to many when life was more laid back.

I remember the coffee house where the elites of the city once gathered to drink coffee and tea and the stronger stuff ordered from the small bar next to it.

Much of the older clientele - my sources - still patronised the place even after the first five star hotel - the Holiday Inn - was built on the bank of the Sungai Sarawak overlooking the White Rajah's citadel, Fort Margherita.

Others like the Hilton and Crown Plaza, just across the road from the Holiday Inn, came much later. An old Aurora faithful is former Agriculture Minister Datuk Dr Sulaiman Daud.

He continued to stay there whenever his ministerial duties took him to Kuching even when the carpets were threadbare and the wallpaper moth eaten.

How can I forget Aurora when one of the highlights of my visits to Kuching was the series of parry and thrusts I had with Tun Abdul Rahman Yaakub at his Press conference after the shadow play moves with nephew Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud burst out in full confrontation.

I had asked him a number of questions about the timber concessions some State leaders had too much of.

The good Tun gamely gave all the answers which made good copy for the reporters who were there.

He ended the focus on timber concessions by asking: Why are you asking all these questions about timber concessions? Are you interested to have some?

Some, like the Tun, have retired from active life while some others have already passed on into the great beyond.

But Taib is still there. Still an active man after almost two decades as Chief Minister and destined to be the leader to take Sarawak into the next millenium.

Presumably, a favourite refrain of Taib, popular with other politicians as well, is: "I'll stay for as long as the people want me to." And many I spoke to want him to. After all, look what he has done for Kuching.

The Waterfront (like Penang's Esplanade), stretching from the Holiday Inn to the main bazaar, is popularly acclaimed.

If anyone thinks Taib had been Chief Minister for far too long, he should remember that Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad was Menteri Besar for a quarter of a century (during which time he, too, must have invoked the favourite line of politicians, "as long as people want me") before he was voted out.

He is close to 70 and looks it but still he had wanted to go on.

He, too, had changed the skyline of his State. Wan Mokhtar will be remembered as the man who had transformed Terengganu from an eastcoast backwater into a modern State.

But, according to a common lament everywhere, there is still so much to do.

Others, too, wail: There is so much to do and so little time in which to do it.

Is this why Singapore leader Lee Kuan Yew is Senior Minister after he resigned as Prime Minister?

Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib was Menteri Besar of Perak for nearly 17 years, and still not the worse for wear, had left his mark on the State too.

Another marathon man is Negri Sembilan's Tan Sri Isa Samad but who, unlike Ramli, is still Menteri Besar.

Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Khoon is beginning his third term as Penang's Chief Minister.

In Kelantan, Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat is also beginning his third term.

Would this be his last term? He is likely to stay on for "as long as people want him" because "there is still so much to do".

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who became Prime Minister in 1981, announced recently that this is going to be his last term as he would be too old to lead the nation after the next general election.

The wags have it that the man who had provided the country with such strong leadership may stand down as Prime Minister midterm to give his successor a chance to lead before he calls an election.

Alot of people are generally delighted by Dr Mahathir's announcement.

Some are delighted because they believe he has done so much for the country and want him to enjoy whatever time he has left on this earth with his family.

Others are delighted simply because they dislike him and want him to go and yet others are happy because the one man who has been standing in their way for so long is finally about to leave the scene.

There are also those who don't want him to leave. These are those who had benefited tremendously under his prime ministership and want to continue to enjoy benefiting more.

They would probably have to leave the scene too, after Dr Mahathir stands down.

Alot of people say there is actually nothing wrong in staying on and on but "as long as the people want me".

In the West, leaders want to stay on and on as well as they too are great believers in themselves. Baroness Thatcher who was Prime Minister of Britain for more than a decade wanted to stay on. She almost cried when she was forced to go.

Germany's Helmut Kohl, a master tactician, was for 16 years the Chancellor of Germany until his government was thrown out in the last election.

So what is so bad about one man dominating the scene for so long.

(END)