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Don't repeat mistakes of the past

Mazlan Nordin

COMPARISON is odious, so the cliché goes. And yet one cannot but compare the coming Malaysian election with the hustings already conducted in the US in the run-up to the presidential election in November 2000.

A recent analysis by a woman correspondent on the American presidential race in the British newspaper Observer helps to explain things. It began with the disclosure: "Americans, generally speaking, resent having non-Americans analyse their domestic affairs."

Mentioned as example was CNN's Larry King Live interview with ex-President Ronald Reagan's former campaign manager Lyn Nofziger who was asked to give his opinion on Dutch, the Reagan biography written by Kenyan-born writer Edmond Morris.

"How", Nofziger sneered, "could an African possibly be expected to understand the American presidency?" Not mentioned was that Morris had lived in the US since 1968 and had become a naturalised citizen in 1979. He is still regarded as an "essentially ignorant foreigner".

Things are different in Malaysia. Every Tom, Dick and Harry from foreign shores can comment and pass judgment on Malaysia and its leaders, government, the judiciary and everything else, including the economy.

Well, do we remember the US Vice-President Al Gore's speech praising demonstrators on a rampage against the elected Malaysian Government? He had also skipped dinner to which he had been invited. Other foreign leaders, however, who were invited stayed to reciprocate Malaysian hospitality.

As is already known enormous pressure is being exerted by the foreign media, analysts, commentators and speculators in Malaysian politics. Published and printed in Malaysia are the Asian Wall Street Journal and the International Herald Tribune. More often than not their reports about Malaysia are not favourable.

Along with them are the foreign newsweekly magazines with anti-Malaysia commentaries by such as David Roche in Time recently.

Televised on CNBC Asia was Martin Soong's report on nomination and polling dates in the Malaysian elections. There was the remark then about certain political parties not happy with the limited time for campaigning. As is known, the campaign period in Singapore is shorter. Would Soong have voiced the dissatisfaction of the Opposition there?

Sometime in June, CNBC was granted an exclusive interview with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. But almost immediately after, it carried Roche's derogatory remarks about Malaysia and its economic policy. One wonders whether Soong would do the same vis-a-vis Singapore's political leaders.

For Malay voters presently are other reminders. Published years ago in Tempo, the Indonesian weekly magazine was a special report on the Malays in Singapore. Headlined Takkan Melayu Hilang di Singapura (Never shall Malays fade away in Singapore) it began with the sentence: "The Malays are a minority in their own home."

An accompanying report was headlined "Booming voice, but no strength". With it was a photograph of a Malay kompong group.

The dramatic headline comes from a remark said to have been made by Hang Tuah, the last Malay hero before his banishment from the Malacca court and the fall of the sultanate to the Portuguese in 1511. "Tak Melayu Hilang Didunia," he said.

As it was, the Malacca sultanate crumbled due to treachery and disunity and for over 300 years thereafter colonisation spread to other parts of the archipelego.

We remember then Santayana's advice: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." To which must be added the reminder that some people remember the past perfectly well and enjoy repeating it.

As in other democratic countries, power in Malaysia comes from the ballot box and there is no alternative to the freedom exercised by Malaysians, whether Bumiputeras, Chinese or Indians, casting their votes on polling day. May we exercise our right wisely.

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