

The 2001 wish list

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On Politics

By ABDULLAH AHMAD

YEAR 2000 has only gone for a day into the silent limbo of the past. I was happy to let it go for it was imperfect for me personally (hospitalisation) and I suppose also for the Barisan Nasional (Lunas), and the Government (the disgraceful heist at two military camps in Grik).

As Brooks Atkinson said in *December 31*, "... and Thank God that it can go".

As conventional wisdom says, a year's end is neither an end nor a beginning but simply a carrying on, with all the wisdom that experience can instil in us.

The pre-Deepavali, Christmas, Hari Raya and New Year shopping, parties and revelries appeared bigger and happier, reflecting, I think, that Malaysians had regained their capacity to spend and, sad to say, for some to squander.

Whatever, it seems that the various races are quite united, accept the *de facto* and *de jure* institutions and will defend the time-honoured formula of sharing power that was agreed to by the founding fathers so that Vision 2020 can be realised during its time-frame.

When you ponder, it does occur that many things might have been done and others done differently in the light of experience. I wish the ruling coalition, Umno especially, will be more imaginative, brave and even intellectually combative and innovative towards current issues.

Its old methods and perceptions — goodness knows — have not and nor are they likely to work well in the New Year and beyond.

He did not behave, either through body language, words or actions, like boys and girls do on the last day of the third term of the fifth form.

Dr Mahathir was in good mood and he is rarely given to pretence. He can only do his best, and I suggest let the *rakyat* judge him in 2004 or earlier.

Dr Mahathir is one year older than Alan Greenspan and Jiang Zemin and, in 2003 when his term as Umno president expires, he will only be 78. Dr Mahathir and Atal Bihari Vajpayee were both born in December 1925 and they will be less than 80 when they face the next polls.

These days they are relatively young men. What young Malaysians, Chinese and Indians must do is to shock these leaders. As George Bernard Shaw said 82 years ago, "It's all the young can do for the old, to shock them and keep them up-to-date".

At least, it is perceived by many that young Malaysian voters and potential voters are doing a good job tormenting the ruling parties, against the cock of the walk in particular.

Not only have Umno and the Government to reinvent themselves, Malaysians also have to do some serious thinking themselves. Either we continue to live in isolation, respectively, as Bumiputeras, Chinese, Indians and others, or become Malaysians, which means more than a notion. Feeling and impulse must be genuinely Malaysian rather than Malay, Chinese or Indian. The nation, peace and prosperity come first, before racial agendas. Let's free ourselves of racial prejudices as much as possible.

The Umno ideologues and think tanks, if the party has them, should search for an idea, new parameter, a new captivating slogan and agenda that would set the young Bumiputeras, and even other Malaysians, on fire, and free them from the feeling of social deprivation and seeming political indecision and direction.

As the nation proceeds on a gradual road towards some political maturity, I hope it will eventually evolve into something like a *bangsa Malaysia* — an amalgam of all the virtues of its three main racial components.

It will succeed only if everyone is totally prepared to forgo his racial advantages. Even if it did in a hundred years' time it shall still be a quite hopelessly uneven and fractured divide, between the city and the kampung, traditional and new, the "haves" and the "disadvantaged"; the rich and the poor, the largely immigrant squatters and numerous foreign beggars who are eyesores at public places.

Something more worthy has to be done and quickly too.

I agree with Askiah Adam, an opposition columnist, that there is a harmful obsession with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's successor and the Prime Minister should no longer entertain these queries with answers.

Dr Mahathir and Umno have already anointed Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The only question is, when the succession will take place.

The last time I saw Dr Mahathir was at his second day open house and I must say this to doubting Harrys and Toms:

Neither the Government nor any of us must compromise racial harmony. It must exist, whatever the cost. The Government must do what it takes to preserve Malaysia as it is, with some prospect of greater tolerance. Extremism of any kind, from whatever stream, must be efficiently, ruthlessly and quickly squashed.

I like to recall my memories of the British Military Administration, the brief Malayan Union, the British Colonial rule and the early years of Merdeka.

The Malays were a ragged race, poor and threadbare. The Chinese, Indians and the Eurasians were better off. One could see all this in Kuala Lumpur, Malacca Ipoh, Penang, even in Johor Baru and Kota Baru, at the Penang Free School, Anderson School, Victoria Institution and at the University of Malaya, technical college and even at the agriculture and teachers training colleges. I paused, long enough to make me wonder what had gone wrong.

There is no question that during the last 29 years (NEP, et al) the Bumiputeras have improved beyond recognition. Still, it is below the target. The other Malaysians, because of their work ethic, prosper and will continue to do so in future. I congratulate them for their great achievements and future accomplishment.

Malaysians are heading for a challenging and tumultuous 2001. The threat of a global economic slowdown, globalisation, the continuing racial polarisation and the Malay political divide; demands for greater democracy, good

Thomas Jefferson said
an honest leader can
feel no pleasure in the
exercise of power over
his fellow citizens
and, if I may add,
unless it is absolutely
necessary to
maintain law and order
and the state of the
Malaysian
Union or federation

governance and transparency
will mount.

The shaking off of all these
effects will require new poli-
cies, orientation and different
responses, otherwise we are
in for a great shock. New
issues will surface. Perhaps
even scandals.

I have been fighting for a
long time — in and out of
government — that Malaysia
must put a high premium on
English (not at the expense of
Bahasa Malaysia, of course.
It can be done).

Had we not been short-
sighted, we would not have
been facing problems with the
poor standard of English in
Malaysia (including in this
newspaper). The standard is
getting worse by the day
among all races, especially
the Malays. The Bumiputeras
in Sarawak and Sabah by and
large have better command of
English than their counter-
parts in the Peninsular.

I would like to see in the
New Year a serious effort by
the Government to stem the
deterioration in an asset we
once had. Let's do something
concrete about this often de-
bated subject.

I am tired and worried, as
many Malaysians are, about
Malaysia's capacity in future
to participate actively in the
global economy and interna-
tional relations.

To start with, bring back
into service good old English
teachers. Stop making our
universities into factories
churning out mono-lingual
workers.

Personally, my stars were
off course during the final
days of 2000. As is the cus-
tom, almost everyone has an
event last year which so well
retains its character over the

years that it becomes or
should be a haven in future.

Mine was five days and four
nights at Gleneagles Intan
hospital watching drowsily
some dull television program-
me, the social-cum-working
visit to Putrajaya, meeting
elder relatives, my son's in-
laws, the New Year Eve dinner
with the family and friends at
Citron, which sits on the lovely
lush gardens on Stonor Drive
and joining thousands of
ordinary people at the
Petronas Twin Towers, and
then to Bangsar to observe
Malaysians welcome 2001. It
was a happy sight.

Between re-reading George
Kennan's containment policy
and conferencing via phone
and fax, much to the distress
of my wife and my doctors, I
thought perhaps Kennan's
book should be compulsory
reading for Umno leaders and
members in tandem with C.C.
Too's memoirs.

Kennan advocated and
successfully, though it took
decades of appropriate
American strategy, how to
counter the threat of Soviet
expansionism in the aftermath
of the Second World War and
the advent of the Cold War.

Too's book describes how we
fought and won against the
Malayan Communist Party
and his important role in it.
Too's offices and mine were
next to each other for a year
in the Parliament building
during the National Operation
Council rule.

He could smell a communist
a hundred miles away and
always said I was a Malaysian
nationalist. It took "Ghulam"
to arrest me as an alleged
communist and only after Tun
Razak died.

In Malaysia, the struggle
for dominance will continue,
with the majority seeking and
attempting to assert its domi-
nance for itself, while the big
minority, advanced and more
sophisticated and media savy,
appears to be unwilling to
submit and accept the ma-
jority as dominant.

Meanwhile, *realpolitik* has
brought the minority's en-
deavour to a temporary
standstill. I believe, in the
long run, status quo will be
maintained and strengthened.

What is needed is that all
constitutional provisions must

be scrupulously adhered to
and implemented. Law en-
forcement leaves much to be
desired. Lat's cartoon, which
was published yesterday, says
it all. And that's about mun-
dane things, though impor-
tant.

While there will always be
an explosive potential, I do
not believe there will be an
ethnic confrontation here if all
are sensible, sane and prag-
matic.

To reduce potential conflict,
the eradication of poverty
must transcend race and be
scrupulously prosecuted.
There should be no recurring
talks or even a hint — no
matter how subtle — about the
long-settled social contract.
There will be a level playing
field as soon as there is
economic parity among
Malaysians.

I have been lucky in my 63
years, lucky in 1957 to enter
journalism through a deliber-
ate decision, with no qualifi-
cations at all except five O-
Levels. I am now back full
circle. My fervent hope is to
see Malaysia continue to
prosper, the races to remain
united and a serious start will
have been made in the New
Year to give English the
proper place it deserves in
our nation.

The end of the year is al-
ways an emotional time, a
time of reflection and cele-
bration with the family, rel-
atives and friends, the suc-
cesses (even failures) we
have had. Most of us did just
that last Sunday.

Life is a struggle, about
hope and fulfillment. As Ar-
istotle said, men cling to life
even at the cost of enduring
misfortune. Without power
men and women are impotent.
Thomas Jefferson said an
honest leader can feel no
pleasure in the exercise of
power over his fellow citizens
and, if I may add, unless it
is absolutely necessary to
maintain law and order and
the state of the Malaysian
Union or federation.

The prize for a general is
not a bigger tent but com-
mand. For the PM it is the
carrot and the big stick.

I wish readers a happy and
prosperous 2001 and beyond.
Health, long life and happi-
ness. *Kita bolehlah.*