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Change for a noble purpose

NO empowerment is as effective as self-empowerment. This is the core of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's message to Bumiputera professionals. This, too, has been the underlying philosophy of the Government's policies or, as perceived by some neo-liberal subscribers, state intervention.

The help given by the Government to the Bumiputeras is akin to teaching a man how to fish rather than giving him a fish. The aim is to raise the socio-economic status of the community and, simultaneously, attain economic parity among all races.

Such help was given to prevent the "ghettoisation" of the Bumiputeras, not to make them the brats of national economy. Some progress have been attained - an achievement which began at the point when the community embraced a culture of change, sieving through their legacy to nurture the good and weed out the bad. As pointed out by Dr Mahathir, in 42 years, a dignified, modern and respected race had risen but alas, it has yet to reach its full potential.

More distressing is his observation that there are "already signs that this fragile, young civilisation is about to decline rather quickly". This is seen in the lackadaisical attitude of the Malays which explains why they are easily complacent, indulge in power tussles and acrid enmity. Such tendencies must be purged lest this modern civilisation will crumble and the efforts in the four decades since independence will come to naught. Our fate will be like Shelley's "Ozymandias, king of kings; (who said) Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair nothing beside remains ... boundless and bare..."

Dr Mahathir's warning is timely for history proves that it takes little time to turn the clock centuries back. Cultural change is desirable for a positive determination of greater progress. Intellectual scoundrels will cling to the tradition of moral geography which linked environment and race to temperament, merit and wisdom. The theory of racial superiority is as wrong as the one that proclaimed that the earth is flat. All races have the same capabilities.

The perception that culture plays a role lies in the dynamism of some values in bringing good or bad and in spurring on or blocking progress. Hence, there is truth in sociologist Max Weber's theory that "in the history of economic development, culture makes all the difference as seen in the enterprise of the Chinese, Indians in East Africa, Lebanese in West Africa, Jews and Calvinists throughout Europe".

But this does not translate into ethnic exceptionalism or exclusivism. Rather it shows that culture identifies a race and determines the progress or fall of a race.

Bumiputeras need to have an expansive spirit to imbibe the good and drop the bad. This means having greater independence and transformative capability to go forward. The tendency to walk the path of get-rich-quick has prevented a greater presence of Bumiputeras in domains such as high-technology and retail businesses where professionalism is strongest and most resolute. We do not want the community to build Gulf Sheikdoms where, cursed by easy riches, some Arabs fail to make progress in knowledge and technology.

But change must be for a greater good and not for the sake of blindly keeping up with the West. The challenge for Bumiputera professionals is to

liberate themselves from self-imposed limitations and lead the community
in reaching its full potential.

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