

09/07/2000

Display of Pas links by students in Egypt

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MY visit to Cairo last month brought me into contact with Malaysian students there. There are some 5,500 Malaysian students spread across Egypt. Most of them are enrolled at the famous Al-Azhar University pursuing various Islamic courses.

A small number are studying at Cairo University. A senior lecturer there wondered why his university couldn't get more than a handful of Malaysian students each year. The few I met there were medical students. In fact, one of them said the first batch graduated last year and were now doing their internship.

Cairo at this time of the year is rather hot. In the open, temperature rises to almost 40 degrees Celsius but the night is cooler. Unless they have some business to tend to, most people prefer to stay indoors. Late in the evening, strollers would emerge and walk along the Nile, giving a romantic setting to a city full of history and excitement.

But Cairo is very polluted and more populated than some other cities I've been to. This, and the heat, however, did not deter tourists from enjoying the sights. Most would flock to the Khan-Kalili bazaar hunting for souvenirs or enjoying a cup of mint tea or thick coffee.

Inevitably, one comes across Malaysian students too, many of whom find Khan-Kalili simply irresistible. The bazaar runs like a maze and one goes from one alley to another looking for bargains in the form of gem stones, brassware, old cameras, Arabian robes and the usual silverware and costume jewellery besides a host of other things Arabic.

It was then that I was told of the existence of a Malaysian "restaurant" offering Malay food and other favourites. Together with a few other friends, I wasted no time in getting there. Apparently, other Malaysians were there earlier and word got around that Malay food was available right in the heart of Cairo.

Egyptian food wasn't bad but I felt the need for a change. So, I joined Mega, Manja, Mat Hussin, Kamsiah, Zukiman and several others at Sri Kelantan, as the restaurant is known. As it turned out, the restaurant is more of a two-roomed flat on the ground floor operated by a group of students from Kelantan studying in the city.

They provide reasonably priced and decent food which hungry Malaysians devour as if they've not seen food for days. This was followed by teh tarik, of course.

But what caught our eyes was the Pas poster plastered at the top of the hallway. A montage of Pas leaders smiling down on everyone gave a clear indication of the students preferred choice of political leaders and ideology. This was amply demonstrated two days later at a dialogue between representatives of the students and visiting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Some male students were dressed in white jubah with white skullcaps while others were in slacks and short-sleeved shirts. Females were covered head to toe, with only an opening for their eyes.

The males were seated at one end of the hall while females at the other. This was the scene that greeted visitors when they entered the hall for the dialogue.

This compares with the scene the day before at the Cairo University where Egyptian students joined their faculty staff to listen to the PM's address and then engaged him in an open dialogue.

Male Egyptian students were in jeans and pants while females were in blouses and long dresses with their heads covered with simple scarves. The contrast was so glaring that led some of us to conclude that the Malaysian students were trying to make a political statement rather than to engage in constructive discussion.

I later learnt that many Malaysian students at Al-Azhar University were courted by Pas from the day they set foot on Egyptian soil. Frequent visits by Pas leaders to Cairo often led to unchecked membership drives and this has apparently segregated the students politically.

Are they doing well in their studies, one might ask! I've not been able to gather enough statistics on this but an Education Ministry source said the success rate had declined to 40 per cent in recent years.

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