

29/05/2000

Facing a 'New Malay' dilemma

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IN the course of the 54th Umno assembly, the term "Melayu Baru" popped up again. Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad once more attempted to explicate his idea on the subject. The term was first used not so long ago and the immediate reaction from some quarters was: "What is wrong with Melayu Lama?" The Malays in general have a very strong attachment to tradition.

A rally cry that is continually heard - it is the title of a recent book - is "Melayu Takkan Hilang" (lit. the Malays will not disappear).

But while the importance of preserving tradition is widely acknowledged, some realise that the need to keep abreast of changes is equally imperative.

But where is the line where tradition stops and modernism begins? Or what are the ingredients of both that can be neatly combined into a compound?

This Malay dilemma is long standing. It first became a subject of public discussion, indeed debate, in the early 20th century. A small group of Malays steeped in Islam first awoke to the reality that the West was not invincible after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). The Japanese proved that Asians could prevail.

This group, mainly resident at Riau then, had come under the influence of the Muslim reformist Jamaluddin Al-Afghani. But it was unable to make any concerted attempt to reform the Malay-Muslim society in the Riau-Lingga archipelago owing to the harsh rule of the Dutch.

The leader of the group (Sayid Syeikh Al-Hadi, Malacca-born), together with a few associates, then moved to Singapore where British administration was considerably more liberal. Here, he gained more adherents, and was able to produce the journal known as Al-Imam (The Leader).

Its message to all Muslims was simple. They ought to be guided by the Quran and Hadith (sayings and tradition of the Prophet). Extraneous elements derived from pre-Islamic culture should be discarded.

The Al-Imam particularly stressed that Islam did not preclude Muslims from pursuing worldly knowledge and success. Indeed, the Malays were criticised because they appeared to have distanced themselves from economic activities.

However, their teachings created a furore in Malay society deeply influenced by animism and Hinduism. Among their most vehement opponents were those who were accepted as ulama (clerics) although their knowledge of Islam was often superficial.

Unlike many of the reformists, few of the traditional ulama had gained intellectual exposure in West Asia. In the Malay states, the authority of those holding official positions (e.g imam and kadi) was conferred by the Rulers. Ulama who did not hold official positions were revered because they were a little more knowledgeable than the masses in religious matters.

Not surprisingly a noticeable cleavage appeared in Malay society. The reformists, comparatively younger in age, became known as "Kaum Muda" (lit. the young ones). The other group, ipso facto, was called the "Kaum Tua" (the old ones).

Apart from disseminating their ideas through the print media, the Kaum Muda also decided to attempt to reform Malay-Muslim education. They found

the existing Quranic and pondok schools unable intellectually to inspire the students who were merely required to learn by rote.

The Kaum Muda decided to establish modern Islamic schools to be called madrasah; the first (Madrasah Al-Iqbal) was in Singapore in 1908. Interestingly, the madrasah is today a subject of controversy in Singapore.

The madrasah in Kaum Muda planning, taking a cue from Western schools, were to be modern schools. They were meant to promote learning to enable the Muslims to keep abreast of knowledge, especially science, rapidly developing in the West.

The madrasah were to be organised more systematically than the traditional Quranic and pondok schools which were run very informally, with no proper schedule, regulations and methods of evaluation, etc.

To pursue his cause more widely Sayid Syeikh relocated to Malacca where another madrasah was founded. But it failed to take off. He then went to Penang and took over management of the Madrasah Al-Masyhoor. It became the flagship of the Kaum Muda schools for many years.

Later it became the trend for religious schools to call themselves madrasah even though they were in fact no more than the traditional pondok schools. The Kaum Muda found their cause an uphill struggle as they formed the minority in Malay society.

Sayid Syeikh nonetheless persisted. He expanded his media activities, founding two popular papers - the Al-Ikhwan and Saudara - both in Penang. His able lieutenant by then was Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin, father of the present Penang Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Hamdan.

The British administration too frowned on the activities of the Kaum Muda which threatened to upturn Malay-Muslim world views. In one known instance, the Special Branch detained a popular Kaum Muda teacher on suspicion that he was disseminating communist doctrines.

In due course the Kaum Muda influence became more diluted as Malay society became exposed to other influences, inter alia, Turkey's "Young Turks" movement and Sukarno's nationalist movement.

As a consequence, the Young Malays Union was founded in Kuala Lumpur in 1938 led by Ibrahim Yaacob, attempting to introduce egalitarianism in Malay society, followed, after World War II, by the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (Cohort of Conscious Youths, led by Ahmad Boestamam) which inspired Umno to form its Youth wing.

In every instance, the youths were impatient for change but found the existing societal structure difficult to penetrate. Conservative elements, which were the majority, totally opposed change.

For those who felt that change was unavoidable, the perpetual dilemma was what traditional elements should be retained and what aspects of modernism welcomed. And in what proportion the two should be combined. Dr Mahathir's recipe is a calculated balance of both.

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