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Long winding road ahead before we have a non-Malay Prime Minister

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THE curse of Mahsuri on Langkawi should have effectively ended with the discovery of her seventh generation descendant, 14-year-old Aishah Nawawi.

However, it does not seem to be as smooth as that when some quarters are disputing this, claiming that she is only the sixth generation descendant, meaning only the generation after Wan Aishah can truly be the deliverance of Langkawi.

But curse or no curse, the island had, even before Wan Aishah was born, boomed beyond the imagination of those from and outside Langkawi.

Much as many Malays from the island had complained that the development of the island had not benefited them, as many others have progressed and expanded their existence far ahead of their predecessors.

The Malays of Langkawi, as in any other part of the country, are caught up in a similar divide - some successful while others claimed to have floundered along the way.

The successful ones moved on, becoming part of the statistics of the burgeoning middle-class, while the others lament over the incongruity of the wealth distribution and that they were victims of the system.

All these Malays, regardless of which end of the stick they belong to, are generally products of the New Economic Policy which was formulated following the May 13, 1969, racial riots.

No matter how the policy is perceived, it was realised from the political will of some Malay leaders utilising the political power they had to the maximum.

Some three decades after the policy was formulated and ended, it is further pursued through the National Development Policy.

Both policies, had, to a great degree successfully made the Malays more confident and urbane, some dubbed the Melayu Baru and the nouveau riche.

But much of the changes among the Malays was in the pursuit for economic development while the practice of politics in the country remains as conventional and conservative as in pre-1969.

The political system has continued on the basis of Malay leadership with the other races taking on the role of a supporting cast.

Of course, along the way, the political process has had its ups and downs, but under the Barisan Nasional leadership, the concept remains as such, with the Prime Minister always the president of Umno.

However, when opening the MCA general assembly on Saturday, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said there would come a time when the Prime Minister of Malaysia might not be from the Malay community.

Of course, Dr Mahathir said, one of the pre-conditions to this possibility is when the economic level among the races becomes equal, then the sense of communality would also be erased.

Actually, this is not something new from Dr Mahathir.

If one were to reflect on his speeches prior to the economic downturn in 1997, Dr Mahathir had extensively spoken of the Bangsa Malaysia or the Malaysian race which is part of his Vision 2020.

However, the economic downturn, in the words of the Prime Minister, had caused a setback to his vision and the dream of realising the Bangsa Malaysia by the year 2020.

Now that Dr Mahathir has decided to open up discussion on it, it has tingled the political grapevine.

Reactions to his remarks vary. Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad

Muhammad Taib took it as a reminder to the Malays that this is what would happen if the community remains divided.

More liberal Malays tend to be more cautious as showing opposition to the idea may be read as being ultra-Malay while supporting it may be seen as "selling" out the community.

But in essence, the whole issue boils down to what Dr Mahathir said about the distribution of the economic cake.

The whole idea of the need to have political dominance among the Malays is based on the idea that the non-Malays are controlling the larger portion of the country's wealth.

Hence the need to have the political control to provide the political will to pursue policies which can help the Malays in getting a fair share of the economic cake.

But it is also not surprising that Dr Mahathir dares to openly speak about the possibilities of the top political leadership going into the hands of the non-Malays.

The success of the NEP and post-NEP products showed many of the Malays gaining a degree of confidence that some become quite apologetic about the privileges accorded to the community.

Some had even reached the stage of believing that they can fare as well, if not better, than the other races with or without the privileges.

At the same time, some of the non-Malays too, in their grudging acceptance of the NEP, choose to perceive most of the successful Malays not as a result of merit but due to the support and privileges accorded by the system. In short, the NEP and other privileges for the Malays served as a double-edged sword for the Malays.

On one side, these policies helped the Malays to find their footing in life to become as successful, if not more so than the non-Malays, but there is little recognition given by the other communities.

It is while being caught in this quagmire that the Malays have to re-assess the need for political dominance, meaning continuing to struggle to ensure that the choice of Prime Minister remains a Malay.

In addition, given the fact that political parties in the country operate along party lines, it is only to be expected that the top leadership goes to the Malays as they are the majority race.

No doubt the Constitution does not specify that the Prime Minister must be a Malay but by convention, it has always been so and it does not look like it will change in the near future.

Not unless the political parties choose to break away from their racial tags and move on to ideology-based entities.

There have been a few attempting this but none have been successful.

It is going to be a long winding road before there can be a departure from the convention of a Malay Prime Minister for the country.

At the same time, it has not been too bad having a Malay as Prime Minister so far.

But it will be a curse if a Prime Minister, from whatever ethnic group he or she may come from, is not accepted as a Malaysian leader by all.

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