

25/06/2000

Non-Malay PM issue complicated

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WHEN founder president of Umno Datuk Onn Jaafar proposed in 1951 that membership of the party be opened to the non-Malays, he was opposed. It was bitter enough to force him to leave Umno. He went on to form the luckless Parti Negara.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, a prince and a self-confessed playboy, took over the party. He pursued a method of collaboration with the non-Malays which was more acceptable to the Malays.

He pioneered one of the most enduring ethnic political alliances in modern history by promoting the Perikatan, the predecessor to Barisan Nasional.

So formidable was the alliance that in less than a decade, the combined forces of the Malays, Chinese and Indians successfully hastened the departure of the British.

When the Malayan Constitution was penned in London, mostly by non-Malayans, the Malays were guaranteed their special rights in exchange for their acceptance of the citizenship of the Chinese, Indians and other immigrants of Independent Malaya.

Tunku left in disgrace after the 1969 race riots. The happiest Prime Minister in the world, as he often called himself, was accused of favouring the Chinese over his own bangsa (race).

Ironically, he was restored to the position of statesman by the very person who, according to some, hounded him out of office - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Dr Mahathir himself was for many years held in contempt by the non-Malays who believed the label "Malay ultra" given to him by Tunku in the aftermath of the tragedy.

Historians and commentators rated Malaysia's survival as a multi-racial nation from uncertain to slim following the riots. They had the requiem written.

Although they had been proven wrong, race-related issues continue to dominate our politics. But instead of killing one another and burning down each other's properties, we direct our energies towards managing the negative aspects of our multi-racialism and harness the positive ones.

IF this is the case, why should anyone be rocking the boat? And what can be more disquieting than the Prime Minister himself raising an issue which has laid dormant for a long time - a non-Malay as Prime Minister.

Some said it was a statement of fact - that there is nothing to stop a non-Malay from becoming Prime Minister.

Others thought that Dr Mahathir dared to say so because he knew the likelihood of it happening was remote.

There were allegations that said the Prime Minister had gone overboard in trying to please the non-Malays. They pointed to the fact that he made the statement after opening the MCA general assembly.

Still others believed that Dr Mahathir's real intention was to shock the Malays, especially members of his own party Umno.

Whatever is the Prime Minister's motive, the issue is a lot more complicated than merely reading and understanding the Constitution.

If the subject is not discussed more widely, it is because the people are unsure of his real intention and are afraid that it may get out of control.

While it is true that there is nothing in the statute book to bar a non-

Malay from being appointed Prime Minister, the non-constitutional factors are equally important.

It had been argued in the past that demography, religion and culture did not favour a non-Malay being appointed Prime Minister. More so if he is not a Muslim.

By any reasonable assumption, it is difficult for the non-Malays to be in majority in the Lower House of the Parliament where a Prime Minister is elected.

Demographically, there are not enough non-Malay majority areas to tilt the balance against the Malays.

But with the split in the Malay votes, the non-Malay representation can increase in strength. There could come a time when the split is so serious that the Malays have to depend on non-Malay representation to choose a Prime Minister.

Take the 1999 general election as an example. The split in the Malay votes had resulted in the reduction of Umno's representation in the Dewan Rakyat from 89 to 74.

Although the non-Malay representation conversely increased, the number is insufficient to tilt the balance against the Malays.

But the time could come when Malay representation is further weakened and the Malays themselves are fed up with their leaders that they are willing to support a non-Malay as Prime Minister.

Or the non-Malays will have to contend with having a Pas representative as Prime Minister.

NEW Zealand is very much in the news in Malaysia these days. Not so much because it had won the America's Cup for yacht race and for its scenic beauty, but for the things it did to some well-known Malaysians.

Some years ago, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, then the Menteri Besar of Selangor, was detained in Brisbane on his way to New Zealand. He was charged but was found not guilty of failing to declare a large sum of money.

Then a picture purportedly showing the Chief Justice, Tun Eusoff Chin, and a well-known corporate lawyer Datuk V.K. Lingam sailing on Lake Wakatipu surfaced.

Much had been said, reported and discussed about the events. Muhammad was not only set free by the Australian court, but was also found not guilty of corruption charges at home. More recently he was re-elected Umno vice-president.

Eusoff continues to be bugged by the picture but last week had his term extended by another six months.

I like the Utusan Malaysia's headline quoting Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Rais Yatim quoting a Malay saying that whoever eats the chilli will feel its pedas.

Personally, I don't blame people for getting carried away or becoming somewhat careless when they are at a beautiful, tranquil place like Lake Wakatipu.

Sedated by the serenity of the new surrounding and away from the prying eyes of our kay poh chee countrymen, we can be so easily lulled into doing or saying things that would come back years later to haunt us.

I can tell you that being in Queenstown and on Lake Wakatipu can be sedative. I have been there several times since my first visit in 1971.

I had many pictures taken - fortunately with my family - while sailing in the lake. Cameras can do wonders. Ask George Devan, the friendly insurance man, how people react when he trains his camera at them.

I am sure many feared for their lives when they realised some SYTs were in the photographs taken by Devan.

The placid lake was a big attraction to my son when he was a boy. To

dampen his enthusiasm of wanting to jump into the lake, I concocted my own legend. I told him that a child-eating monster lived in it. For a while he believed it.

It is good sometimes to instil fear in ourselves and in the people we care about. Fear, some people say, can be a great motivation.

A colleague and former newspaper editor had a nasty road accident some years ago when heading in the direction of the resort, forcing him to cut short his trip.

Fortunately for me, Queenstown and Lake Wakatipu hold only the fondest memory.

In the many trips my family and I made to the town and its surrounding areas, we enjoyed peace of mind and strengthened family bonds.

Of course, we took a lot of pictures.

THERE is a popular belief among Malaysians that bad things tend to happen three in a row.

For that reason, it is considered bad luck to have three persons in a photograph. It is believed that one will die.

Of course, this is hogwash. Whether you are photographed alone with Devan or with a bevy of beauties, we will all die one day.

But let us for a moment live with our superstition. And assuming that we put a high priority on politics, we can breathe more easily now that three threats of resignation had come and gone.

It started soon after last year's general election by the vanquished DAP secretary-general, Saudara Lim Kit Siang. Reacting to the party's lacklustre performance, he offered to resign.

Technically, he did. He gave up the secretary-general's post, but assumed the chairmanship of the party. To all intents and purposes, he is still the boss.

Then came the MCA president and Transport Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, who announced to the Press that he would resign from the Cabinet after crossing swords with some members of the party's executive committee.

After much debate, he changed his mind purportedly in deference to the wishes of the Prime Minister and the Chinese community.

More recently the controversial Pas Member of Parliament for Sik, Datuk Shahnnon Ahmad, announced his desire to give up the post on health grounds.

He, too, withdrew the threat purportedly out of respect for the wishes of his party.

I use the word "purportedly" rather "deliberately" because only God knows what went on in the minds of these politicians.

We can take their explanation only at face value.

I DARE not assume that others are as desperate as I am in trying to understand what makes politicians resort to the threat of letak jawatan. In my desperation, I sought the counsel of a professor friend.

He is no ordinary professor. To begin with, he looks more like a vagabond than a professor. But I respect him deeply.

This chap had his first book published when he was in Form Three. It was one of those sleazy "novel picisan" which were popular back in the 60s.

Since he is also crafty with languages - Bahasa Malaysia and English - and is spiritualistic, I think I can also call him pendeta (Sanskrit for wise man).

The pendeta told me that this political malady is called Down's Syndrome (with apologies to the medical profession).

He said when a holder of public office is down on his luck and can no longer stand up on account of his own strength, he resorts to the tactic to see if others will come to his rescue.

I asked the professor what medicine can be prescribed for the malaise.

He said reading and prescribed Sun Tzu's Art of War. But since war is not the only objective, he also suggested the works of great masters like Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Confucius and Mencius.

He said while leaders need to be strong, they have also to be wise. So he said the study of Al-Ghazali can add to one's wisdom.

I thank the pendeta for his wise words and promise him nasi kandar the next time I see him.

And what about bringing back the rotan (cane) into the classroom?

I did ask the professor the question. But I don't think he has a problem with that. When we were in school in Alor Star, we feared the rotan as much as we respected Mr Joginder Singh Jessy, our Guru Besar.

So we did not burn down teachers' rooms and torch our rivals. But one pupil did punch the sports master and was severely dealt with and a few were caught at Alor Star railway station on their return from a weekend in Haadyai.

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