

01/07/2000

Race relations

Abdul Razak Abu Chik

THE Sunday breakfast crowd in 'Warung Perasan,' Kampung Baru, was a little more contemplative than usual on the weekend of the MCA general assembly (June 16-18). They were paying more than fair attention to the second lead story in the front page of the mass-selling Mingguan Malaysia while waiting for their roti canai. The headline which caught their eye read, 'Cina, India jadi PM satu hari nanti - Dr M' (Chinese, Indian may become Prime Minister one day - Dr M). For the benefit of readers who fall into the 'foreigners-jealous-of-our-success' category, all of Malaysia's Prime Ministers since Independence have been Malays, as is the fourth Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Ever since Independence, Kampung Baru, a little oasis of Malay real estate in the heart of booming Kuala Lumpur, has stood resolutely against the march of development. While tall buildings reach for the sky, Kampung Baru has retained its kampung character to the point that there exist pockets that are disconcertingly rural.

The third- and fourth-generation sons and daughters of the original pioneer settlers who came from Sumatra may today be city slickers personified. They work in the shiny glass towers not far from the homes their grandparents passed on to their mums and dads, let their hair down in watering holes in nearby Jalan Pinang and drive around in swank cars that cost 10 times as much as the houses they live in. While they may have taken themselves out of Kampung Baru, what's certain is that Kampung Baru has not been taken out of them. Most have attained their comfortable station in life having benefited from the affirmative action accorded to them by their Bumiputera status. So profound was the latest prime ministerial pronouncement that many stopped mid-munch and pushed their plates to one side to devour the front page news instead.

The relevant paragraph read, 'Any person from any ethnic origin has a right to be prime minister. A non-Malay Bumiputera too may become the Prime Minister. I am confident that one day, when Chinese or Indian citizens can be accepted by all ethnic groups, the Prime Minister of Malaysia will no longer be from among the Malays only.' Now, in unenlightened times, the bearer of this message might have found himself incarcerated in some federal rehabilitative facility in some northern state. But this is Dr Mahathir. The present climate is one of peace, harmony and stability. The occasion was his opening address at the MCA general assembly. No one but Dr Mahathir himself would have had the gravitas to voice what is potentially an incendiary statement without causing a riot.

As is the norm in Malaysian politics, such profound pronouncements normally need postscripts. This was no exception. It came the week after the MCA assembly in Cairo, of all places. Speaking to Malaysian reporters after the conclusion of the G15 Summit on June 21, Dr Mahathir elaborated on the statement. 'A non-Malay can only become prime minister - and I stressed this in my speech - if he is accepted by the Malaysian people which include the Malays,' he said. 'If there comes a time when the Malays are prepared to accept a non-Malay as prime minister, we can't stop it, it is the choice of the Malays themselves.' He went on to say that if the Malays became so weak and poor and were reduced to begging from others to the extent that they could be bought to support the non-Malays, then the idea of a non-Malay PM may not be so far-fetched.

The response to the original statement was swift. First off the mark was former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Mohd Taib. The resurrected politician, who was elected one of three Umno vice-presidents during the May Umno general assembly, took the liberty of interpreting Dr Mahathir's statement as a warning not to be complacent and think that the status quo was cast in stone. Muhammad's views on the subject were set out in his book Melayu Baru (The New Malay) which espouses political control as a prerequisite for economic and social attainment. He warned that the top executive position in the country could pass on to a non-Malay if the Malays themselves were disunited. But he believed that for Malaysian society to become homogeneous enough to allow such an eventuality would take a very long time.

Muhammad's response was followed by Umno Youth hollering its dissent. Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein said the Youth wing will not accept a non-Malay Prime Minister - for the time being. Despite recognising that it was a national aspiration to create a 'Bangsa Malaysia' (Malaysian race), he said 'a non-Malay Prime Minister will not fit into the country's current political scenario.' Why is Malaysia not ready for a non-Malay PM? 'For as long as there are irresponsible parties who still politicise racial and religious issues for their own gains,' said Hishammuddin, 'with these people exerting an influence, a Malaysian race will not materialise.'

Reaction from the MCA was predictably sober. Vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng said all Malaysians understood and appreciated the privilege exercised by Umno in choosing a Prime Minister from among its ranks. 'The PM's vision can be realised if we all work together and stay united,' he said. 'What's needed is a leader who represents all the races in the same mould as Dr Mahathir.'

Deputy MIC president Datuk S Subramaniam appreciates Dr Mahathir's frankness but added that the party was comfortable with Umno playing the role of 'big brother' in the coalition. 'It's quite logical that Umno supplies the Prime Minister as the Malays are in the majority in this country,' he said.

For Pas, the issue is not race, but religion. Its stand is that anyone of any race or religion can be Prime Minister. A non-Muslim Prime Minister is acceptable provided he allows Muslims to be governed and subjected to the syariah (Muslim laws) in the conduct of their daily lives.

Pre-empting the inevitable flak, Dr Mahathir said he was not trying to raise the heckles of Umno members into disliking him. 'I am just stating a fact,' he said. In times past, the bearer of such a message could easily have found himself hung, drawn and quartered for blasphemy. But now the BN is in a strong position, Umno has had its vigour restored, and Dr Mahathir's clout is not in doubt.

In its present state, Malaysia appears to have a workable multi-racial model worthy of emulation by other strife-torn societies. Recently, in Fiji, ethnic Fijians have resorted to hostage-taking to assert indigenous rights. When Indonesia faced ethnic tensions following the fall of Suharto, many looked to Malaysia with envy as the epitome of racial harmony.

Under the British colonial system, the Chinese were identified with commerce, the Indians were pressed into plantation estates, while the Malays stuck to government. This legacy sowed the seeds of jealousy, mistrust and enmity which erupted in the May 13 riots of 1969. The New Economic Policy (NEP) addressed the imbalance which went a long way towards alleviating poverty and restructuring society away from the British model to one that was harmoniously Malaysian, warts and all.

Malaysia's multiracialism is neatly summed up in a skit by the popular

Comedy Court duo of Alan Perera and Indi Nadarajah. The pair, whose speciality is to poke fun at racial stereotypes, begin their act by proudly announcing; 'Malaysia is a multi-racist...er, multi-racial society.' This far-from-Freudian slip says a lot about where we stand in matters to do with race.

(END)