

10/01/2000

The party over, seize opportunities the next wave provides

Abdullah Ahmad

THE party is over. We have said farewell to the 20th century and welcomed the 21st century and the New Age.

We are glad we got here in one piece despite wide expectations of border-crossing Armageddon terrorists, the dreaded Y2K computer bug and other fears and nagging worries.

The world did not end as predicted. And I survived sceptics and drunks to write this article. This notwithstanding fears remain.

The media hype made most New Yorkers, and even this expatriate, stock up like mad on emergency supplies: flashlights (torchlights), bottled water, food and medicine topped everybody's list. I could not afford not to be Y2K-careful as I was alone in Big Apple, the family was and is in KL. I read and reread the US Army Survival Manual and bought a survival kit! I also bought two water-proof flashlights (US\$20 each) and many candles just in case I had to go downstairs (I live on the 29th floor of a 45-floor apartment in Central Park West) as the stairway would be dark.

As I type this (January 4) I still do not feel like the dawn of a new epoch has arrived in the Ages of Man. Nevertheless, it is an appropriate occasion for us to relax and take stock of where we are, how far we have come and where we are headed for.

How much the World has changed. How much Malaysia has altered. Evidence abound on how small the globe has become. Time magazine chose Albert Einstein its Person Of The Century for unlocking the atomic energy.

The Rotary Club of Malaysia selected the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for his political accomplishments, giving our nation an international identity.

The last century produced inspiring leaders like Franklin Roosevelt, Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Churchill and at home: Dato' Onn Jaafar, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Tun Razak and Dr Mahathir. Yet it also gave birth to Stalin, Pol Pot and "Ghulam".

The millennium we had just stepped out from has been the millennium, first of Europe and then the US. The Americans since the last half of the 20th century have been exporting their ideas, arts, sciences, goods and technology, political and business systems to the rest of the world and continue to do so.

Their missionaries strived hard to make others Christians, to save them they say. American soldiers are stationed all over the world to help keep status-quo: Pax Americana. As the Economist (December 31) - says "Like it or not (much of the world often has not), for the moment the West (American) has triumphed". The Americans will work even harder this century in their quest to dominate the world It may happen because it appears unavoidable.

The Islamists, the Chinese and Indians, even the Japanese, may yet flourish in the future. May be in the 22nd century or even earlier, if they would allow creativity to stay ahead in the knowledge-based business world. They were impressive and I admired the Asian "exiles" whom I visited in the Silicon Valley last month.

If only their talents could be utilised in their homelands under unstifling circumstances, less stratified and rarefied conditions. With reduced corruption, and more transparency and good governance it would not be impossible to have an Asian or a Chinese century sooner than we dare hope for because they (we) would have greatly accelerated the pace of

social change.

When the Asian economic crisis broke in the summer of 1997, some people rejoiced while many others mourned. As we and our Thai and Indonesian neighbours suffered convulsions, others were spared.

Their turn will come. What goes up comes down and what is down goes up. Failure always lurks in the shadows of success. This is not a wish that the terrible things that happened to us should also occur to them. It is only to emphasise cyclical inevitability.

I have learned from personal experiences with much pain that it is difficult, sometimes easier, to borrow money and even harder to repay; easier to lend than to collect. The best thing is to heed Shakespeare's advice -neither a borrower nor a lender be. But one will never become rich if one shies away from high returns which imply and entail high risks.

Read "The Collapse of Barrings" and "The Wealth and Poverty of Nations - Why Some are So Rich and Some So Poor", and you will know what I mean.

I joined the New Yorkers lining up on the eve of the millennium for the chance with long odds to spend US\$100 million (US\$1 = RM3.80). I bought nine lottery tickets (at US\$2 each) for the whooping Millennium Jackpot, New York's largest ever lottery prize. But, alas, none of my tickets hit the lucky six numbers. My plans went up in smoke.

Now, I can't buy a controlling interest in the Business Times! I can never become a millionaire much less a billionaire because I definitely lack luck, Chinese industry, Jewish networking, Japanese Calvinist work ethics and Indian opportunism, hard work and boldness.

I struggle - like many of my co-religionists - to have a footing in two Worlds - Western and Islamic - each in different ways represents dynamism, and a source of energy. I am lucky because I have a capacity to adapt. Many others are less flexible and short on tolerance.

Life can never be fixed, it is best to allow it to take its natural course. I believe, it is a celebration to be able to enjoy both civilizations; certainly not an indictment. I know many friends who are torn between the forces of resurgent Islamic conservatism and continuing being secular.

As in the Internet society, greater political freedom and prosperity become more pervasive the choice should become easier. There is no conflict between "controlled modernisation" and Islam. Just like what Deng Xiaoping said of China that she had been moving along a path of "controlled modernisation". The struggle is between dogma and the conservatives' political agenda and modernisation, scientific argument and logics.

Nietzsche and others had written God's obituary. Yet the mosques, churches, temples and synagogues are full - I think the overwhelming majority of people, surely of Malaysians, continue to profess their belief in God. I speak earnestly, if not always ably, of my relationship with Allah.

Last week was festive times around the globe. And today we are celebrating Hari Raya Puasa with gusto - thanks to a recovering economy. A good feeling after enduring last year's recession.

The Government has said that the economic crisis is over, and I suppose, we can look forward to reading more welcoming statistics, hearing less rhetoric, and enjoying good times again. We are still evolving as a nation and had endured. We look ahead to forging out of diversity a feeling of oneness, a common commitment and destiny.

In the November general election non-Muslim Malaysians, except those who supported DAP, experienced, I believe, more than a hint of religious extremism and what is to come. As many Malays abandoned Umno (it lost the oil-rich Terengganu and 16 Members of Parliament) many more non-Malays

switched their support, particularly so in Penang, when they threw out DAP yet again in favour of Barisan Nasional.

The election results will provide an endless debate among politics-obsessed Malaysians but the fact remains that a substantial number of people were less than happy with certain government policies and actions. There has been a sea of change in the Malaysian public attitude.

They are becoming less and less willing to accept government explanations, listen to government media and the mainstream newspapers. The Malay assertiveness, I know was not caused by economic strain. There was hardly any effect of it in the Malay heartlands.

They have begun once again to question their leaders' political directions, especially in education, rural development and the inculcation of Islamic values in government policies and programmes. One of the great challenges facing Umno in 2000 will be on how to integrate greater Islamic values and good governance without alarming the non-Muslim Malaysians. I am sure under the leadership of Dr Mahathir the outcome will be properly balanced.

Even so, many challenges remain. The first is to contain the backlash and prepare the Bumiputras for globalisation. For its Western proponents and the non-Malays, globalisation is a godsend dream of opportunity and prosperity. And for the opponents like those who demonstrated in Seattle and the disadvantaged Bumiputeras, it denotes a new scale of greed and inequality; it only creates angst because globalisation can only accentuate greater division. Nevertheless, they have to meet the challenge of globalisation or they will be left behind even further.

However strong Dr Mahathir, or the Government, pushes the Bumiputeras towards progress it will come to nought unless they respond positively. No one can be sure how Bumiputeras would respond to all the conflicting pressures. As modernisation and the new century gets under way, they must seize the opportunities the next wave provides, better still, face the challenge of the Information Age or they can duck it with all the attendant risks.

If they are clever and determined, they should acquire this knowledge and grasp ideas with vengeance and use the information revolution to promote prosperity, deeper political reform and become closer to their Maker. The Government's role should be to help Bumiputeras cope with these rapid changes and dilemma.

I need to say that many of the basic assumptions - political and social - from earlier times have vanished or are fast perishing. And if this disadvantaged community wants to have a meaningful part in the radical reconfiguration of the global economy and ours, its members must with haste assess its position.

Malaysia (especially the Bumiputras) had never experienced - and my never again - the big advance that they are about to achieve following the knowledge revolution and in the Digital Age.

The worldwide democratisation of knowledge has given us the tools to share, not hoard, new information on science, health and technology. However, in the end, the will to achieve and excel must come from the human heart.

* The writer is Malaysia's special envoy to the United Nations.

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