

09/07/2000

Why are we conducting our affairs in pages of foreign publications?

Amir Firdaus Khan

THE Business Times' editorial on Thursday was brilliant. It tore into the simpleton's but alarmist views - or rather decrees - of analysts and writers, mostly foreign, each time the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange has a slight cold.

In this case, those analysts attributed Monday's performance of the KLSE to the lack of "reformist zeal". A more comical argument was the prediction that fund managers will descend when the Composite Index falls to 700 points.

It prompted the editorial writer to suggest, tongue-in-cheek, of course that Malaysia must rapidly throw out any "reformist zeal" to make sure the CI gets to the 700-point. There is a long way to go.

Firstly, the preoccupation with the term "reform" is laughable. The same malady grips lopsided commentaries on politics of which we are fully aware.

In the economic terrain, with brows furrowed, (some) local analysts are happy to parrot their gleeful foreign gurus who, we suspect, don't read as much and don't slog as hard.

Our miseries soar when the local analysts make it sound more terrifying, as they proved to their peril at the height of the financial crisis.

They inevitably lost their jobs, albeit temporarily, because their employers suffered dearly, partly due to their gloomy forecasts about the then un-pegged ringgit and the KLSE.

For our sake, and for the sake of those who come after us, we must be more competent and confident, say many Malaysians. The feeling is we should be able to poke fun at our tormentors using superior knowledge and a vivid understanding of things.

Who are they? The editorial pages or Op-Ed section of the Asian Wall Street Journal is one. The tirades of its editor-at-large Barry Wain against the Prime Minister make M.G.G. Pillai look like a staunch Umno supporter.

David Roche is another. He is based in London and used to write for the Edge.

Then there are those countless commentators who have never set foot on Malaysia.

They are not devilish, simply amateurish. They genuinely lack insight and they don't try hard enough to build their network of contacts. That's the reason why they know of no other Malaysian intellectual than Dr Chandra Muzaffar.

That's why they keep turning to "an Asian diplomat", "a senior diplomat", "a source familiar with..." and "an insider". All these highly placed sources could well be the same person, if not the writer himself. There is such an unfortunate lack of transparency in their work.

What do we do? The local newspapers know what exactly it is about and they have launched a rearguard action against the foreign media and rogue websites in winning the readers.

Newspaper have long grasped the unmistakable reality that apart from more news, readers welcome nice writing, and hence, discussions. While we have to read everything, including the international magazines, there has to be more debate in the local newspapers.

The arms heist in Grik is a major letdown. It is refreshing to see newspapers questioning the lack of basic procedures employed by the

military and how disjointed the information machinery has been. It is good to see people writing to the newspapers voicing their displeasure.

This should startle all those shadowy sources, who supposedly spoke at length to correspondents of Asiaweek and Far Eastern Economic Review, but those analyses are reduced to a one-liner quote in the actual article.

They ought to take part in local debate. They may want to recoup their lost dignity when they let themselves to be used as pawns by the foreign media. Otherwise many others will have to overcome what a local academic grandly termed as a "fantasy of fear".

In any case, why are we conducting our affairs on the pages of foreign publications ... when we have enough brains and space here? The foreign magazines can have a big readership but they should not have any clout over our minds.

There is no cause for alarm yet. We have made a giant stride. In the mid 1990s, the foreign correspondents were well informed through off-the-records briefings.

As a result they dominated Press conferences especially with the Finance Minister. The incredulous local reporters had to faithfully produce news reports, shaped by the questions and prejudices of the foreign correspondents. It looks trivial but when it happened day in and day out, they were actually shaping public opinion.

From what we gather, now, the foreign journalists no longer enjoy such privileges. When locals dominate Press conferences the views and doubts of the masses are communicated right to the top.

Elevated these past few days is our collective mood. This was when those new faces were inducted into the Umno supreme council. And when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said they were brought in to churn out ideas, one tends to be impressed with the likes of Dr Norraesah Mohamad of Wanita Umno.

She was quoted by this newspaper as saying that Umno needed war-time management, which blends with Dr Mahathir's remarks on Umno facing a hostile environment.

Then she said: "We have to start with ourselves. It is not enough as members of the Umno supreme council to merely support the Prime Minister. We have to assist him.

"No more knee-jerk attitudes and always looking to the top to come out with the solutions."

She wants everyone "to read and read". We shall pray that she keeps up the momentum and writes to newspapers. All the existing supreme council members are quite capable of making such assessments. They are savvy.

One has the feeling that they don't state their views publicly partly because of the tradition of "going through the proper channels".

As a result some politicians are unfairly dismissed as mediocre. The media is a proper enough channel if the comments and assessments are fair and constructive.

And since Umno is faced with a discerning crowd, and people are mercilessly judgmental, Umno will have to impress and dazzle them with intellectual depth as well as the personal touch.

The foreign media and analysts too will be cowed.

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