

Untangling the complex, collective psyche

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THE *Bercakap Dengan Jin* (Conversations With The Genies), a book which serialises Malay supernatural tales, written by one Tamar Jalis, was very popular among the community in the early 1980s.

The book is still being reprinted and continues to be sold in small bookstores and pasar malam, alongside new publications in similar veins.

These supernatural stories, myths and legends, especially those which yarn on Malay prowess, were once described by a veteran writer as a form of escapism for their listeners.

Whatever their merits, they caught the attention of Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In his speech at the Umno general assembly yesterday, the Prime Minister pointed out that the Malays had apparently not learned much from their history.

Apparently the Malays easily forget their history.

"On the contrary, they love to colour their own history with legendary stories for their ego, to comfort and pride themselves in myths they have created.

"Thus they love to stress Hang Tuah's legacy that the Malays will never vanish from the face of the earth."

Reasons for the need to depend on these unrealistic elements to massage the Malay

ego may differ.

However such concern voiced by Dr Mahathir is shared by most Umno leaders.

These legends tend to provide the Malays some semblance of comfort that when it comes to the crunch, someone from their own community, someone with certain powers, would come forward as a saviour of the race.

If the Malays care to reflect, such thoughts prevailed even in the nation's contemporary history — i.e. during the May 13, 1969, racial riots.

The Malays had then believed that there were silat (the Malay martial arts) masters who were capable of sending out *parang and lembing terbang* (flying machetes and spears) to wreak havoc among the enemies.

They also believed at the time that there were Malay leaders who were able to impart the powers of *ghaib* and *kebal* (invisibility and invincibility) to their youths to protect them from their enemies.

Many in the community still subscribe to such beliefs.

They have forgotten the more intrinsic, realistic part of history — the fact that they were saved from oblivion because the Malays wield political power.

They have forgotten too the fact that the Malay leaders had used that same power to impose the New Economic Policy blueprint

Saturday Notes

By Shamsul Akmar

which has managed to ensure the survival of the Malays in the economic life of the country and in education.

But these aspects of the nation's history are more than three decades old — considered quite a long period by some.

As pointed out by Umno Kemaman division deputy chief Ahmad Shabery Chik, the Malays had forgotten even a more recent history.

"Was it not just three years ago that in this very building (the Putra World Trade Centre) that the then US Vice-President Al Gore rudely snubbed our nation's leadership, the host.

"He supported the *reformasi* movement which was against the leadership.

"It was at that period too that the nation was under economic siege, being pressured into accepting the dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

"How many of us would remember that the country's leadership managed to overcome the economic crisis without having to beg from the Western-dominated agencies

of the Malay community

— which would have imposed rules that which have adversely affected the special position and rights of the Malays," he reminded his listeners.

What the delegate was trying to drive home was but a reflection of the frustrations felt by the Umno leadership over the amnesia suffered by the community in past and contemporary history.

But is it mere forgetfulness that has lulled the Malays into giving scant regard for history?

It has to be more than that. It is a case of selective memory — wanting to remember only things that suit their mood or preference of the moment.

Unless of course, the Malays are simply unable to grasp the rather more complicated issues: e.g. how real is the IMF threat? Or the efficacy of the NEP which has helped to ensure Malay survival in the nation's political gamut.

That somehow would be deemed a condescending view of the community's collective intelligence, especially when they are able to understand much more "complex" matters such as supernatural powers.

We can then come to the inevitable conclusion that the Malays simply refuse to remember history and see things in their proper perspectives because their minds have been clouded by hatred — a blind

hatred for Umno and Dr Mahathir.

Then things begin to make sense and the whole episode is that much easier to decipher.

That, however, does not put things right — especially when the very person and political party detested by the Malays are still struggling for the Malay agenda.

That is not something foreign or uncommon in the Malay psyche.

Again, history had repeatedly chronicled how the Malays were capable of bringing about the downfall of their own kind in their anger and hatred.

History had also shown how Perak and subsequently other Malay States ended up being colonised by the British, merely because of the conflict among the Malays bent on securing political control.

These episodes of history showed how the Malays were prepared to lose everything to the British rather than allow their political nemesis to ascend the throne.

Surely these aspects of history could not be forgotten as they have been repeated, reiterated and re-emphasised time and time again.

Then again, that sounds like a wee bit too much to expect from those who listen but do not hear; who watch but do not see.

Tamar Jalis' genies are still a better bet.

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Dr M once again a step ahead with his

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THE big debate began soon after Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad ended his opening speech at the party's 55th annual general assembly yesterday.

No, it was not the debate by delegates on the motions of the assembly, but the discourse among the Press corps and political pundits at the sidelines.

The topic centred on the president's speech which was not as fiery as in previous years, though Dr Mahathir is more noted for his radical and thought-provoking speeches.

There was the speech where he was overcome with emotions when talking about the rampant money politics in Umno.

And another, when he complained of how efforts to weed out corruption in the party was getting nowhere despite his tears, pleas and prayers.

Most recently during a gathering of senior party members, Dr Mahathir drew enthusiastic applause from the delegates when he announced that he had had enough of money politics in Umno, and promised that there will be no mercy for those found guilty.

Many predicted that Dr Mahathir would make similar dramatic statements this time around.

After all, the assembly comes in the midst of continuing action by the party's disciplinary board to investigate and punish corrupt members.

And surely Dr Mahathir would address the intense speculation surrounding the resignation of Umno treasurer and Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin?

He did neither. Instead, Dr Mahathir delivered a marathon speech lasting one

hour and 57 minutes, in which he described the perils awaiting the Malays, their weaknesses and how to overcome them.

If the contents of his speech sounded familiar, it is because the party president had covered those topics previously.

Nevertheless, several supreme council members were singing praises of the president's speech.

"I think it's the most brilliant speech in the history of Umno," declared a supreme council member with an enthusiasm so excessive that it bordered on being sycophantic.

A little more sober was the assessment of party vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

"His speech is extraordinary in terms of his frankness and courage in detailing the problems afflicting the Malays," he said.

This was echoed by fellow vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

"A marathon speech, but very timely, bearing in mind the situation we are facing."

The situation mentioned by Muhyiddin are the dangers that await the Malays if they fail to adapt and overcome some of their core weaknesses.

Specifically, Dr Mahathir outlined how many Malays still possessed the wrong attitude when it came to acquiring knowledge.

Some, he explained, felt that educational opportunities were an inalienable right and took them for granted, while others had a dim view that all that was required of the Malays was to seek religious knowledge.

Dr Mahathir also did not mince his words when he attacked the laid-back at-

COMMENT

By Abdul Razak Ahmad

titude of the Malays when it came to developing themselves economically.

He said many were so preoccupied with getting rich quick that they did not have any qualms accepting bribes in the process.

Unless these weaknesses were addressed, the party president warned that the Malays might not survive for long.

With the party determined to cleanse itself of money politics, some felt that the president should have clarified the party's stand on the matter.

There appeared to be some confusion over several of the disciplinary board's recent rulings against members found guilty of money politics.

Citing an example, a delegate pointed out how the party leadership had continually stressed that members should respect the decisions made by the board and that those found guilty shouldn't appeal.

"However, some members found guilty by the board were only issued with warnings, so what should be their status in the party?"

"And what about those who were censured by the board but still continue to hold other positions? Why haven't they resigned?"

These issues need to be clarified by the leadership, and some were quite disappointed that Dr Mahathir did not raise these matters in his speech.

However, according to supreme council

challenge to Umno and Malays

member and Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Wira Mohd Ali Rustam, Dr Mahathir no longer has to dwell too much on Umno's internal money politics problem.

"There is already so much fear among members because they know that if they do it they will be punished.

"In fact if you look at the current course of the disciplinary board's actions, even the more 'wily' culprits are getting caught.

"The disciplinary action should continue, but without the party talking too much about it as action speaks louder than words," he said.

The party, he added, was now shifting to a higher gear in its efforts to win back all the ground lost to the opposition during the 1999 general election.

After all, opposition parties are continually campaigning among the Malays, telling them not to support Umno as it is allegedly filled with corrupt members and leaders.

As such, the party's efforts to weed out corruption are meant to address the public's perception towards it as much as to cleanse the party.

By enlarging his focus on the Malays, Dr Mahathir is saying that Umno may be determined to weed out corruption, but the Malays must also realise their own weaknesses.

It is also an indication of the development in the party's campaign against money politics, which can be traced back from the 1993 party elections when vote-buying was most rampant.

From then, Umno's fight against money politics included repeated warnings which ultimately led to the amendment of the constitution last year to allow for the es-

tablishment of a disciplinary board to investigate complaints.

From a strategic viewpoint, it is now time for Umno to move on.

And while sceptics wonder whether the Malays would be willing to accept another earful from Dr Mahathir on their own deficiencies, several party leaders see it as a necessity, such as supreme council member Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad.

"The process of cleaning up Umno will continue so that it becomes a party the Malays will look up to.

"But at the same time, the Malays need reminding, so it isn't at all a case of shifting the blame," said Shahrir, whose vocal stand on party matters is well known.

"I have been very critical when it comes to listening to speeches by the Prime Minister, but I find that this is a good speech.

"It presents the Malay-Muslim world view while at the same time reminds the Malays that they shouldn't always blame other people for their own failures," he added.

Doubtless, many would have cheered when Umno's disciplinary board announced strict punishments for those found guilty of money politics.

But by widening his scope to include all Malays and how they should collectively address their weaknesses in order for the race to survive, Dr Mahathir has raised the stakes not only in Umno but also for the Malays.

By issuing this challenge, Dr Mahathir has again stayed one step ahead.

With the next general election due in 2004, Dr Mahathir continues to lead Umno towards that challenge and in higher gear.