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Fear of extinction may well be the driving force for Malay survival

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UMNO does not want the Malays to forget their painful history, as the very survival of the race now depends on it.

As party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad asked when concluding his speech at the party's 54th General Assembly, "Come on Malays, have you forgotten?"

To ensure that the Malays do not forget, his reminder permeated the Assembly. Posters depicting the sufferings of oppressed Muslims greet visitors to the Putra World Trade Centre, serving as grim reminders on the fate which could befall the Malays.

One showed a Bosnian family huddled together and in tears, with their bombed apartment building in the background.

Another depicted a famished group of starving children in some forgotten corner of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Strategically-located along major corridors and walkways, many visitors and delegates, ambushed by the depressing depictions were caught unawares.

Some chose to ignore the gory pictures. Others were uncomfortable being confronted with posters depicting famine while carrying bagfuls of kain songket which they had just haggled mercilessly for at the customary bazaar that accompanies each Assembly.

But apart from party delegates, has Dr Mahathir's reminder been embraced by the Malays outside the hallowed halls of the PWTC? Are the Malays really afraid and fearful, that if they don't buck up their race will come to a gloomy end?

A running experiment can be seen in a Works Department signboard erected at the construction site for a fire station in Taman Sri Hartamas, an upscale neighbourhood on the fringes of Kuala Lumpur.

The signboard, announcing the details of the project, was also pasted with a Barisan Nasional signboard proclaiming that the project was another BN achievement.

A group of friends travelling together for dinner parked their car by that signboard, and one of them, a professional Malay in his late 20s frowned in disapproval at the signage. "Has the Government become so desperate for support that it has to publicly claim credit for every minute accomplishment?"

Our young professional would think otherwise if he actually lived in the area and his house caught fire, but it must be noted that the anger which he expressed is not unique.

It represents the oft-discussed "groundswell of anger" which the Opposition successfully exploited during the last general election.

As Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein put it, "How do we explain that the KLCC and Putrajaya are modern symbols of Islamic civilisation which are equal in stature to the Ottoman Islamic civilisations of yore?"

Well, forget KLCC and Putrajaya if Malays, such as our young professional in Taman Sri Hartamas and many others like him cannot even grasp the significance of the neighbourhood fire-station.

Consider how common it has now become for Malays to view symbols of "national pride" such as the Petronas Twin Towers and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, and the first thing that comes to mind are the so-called "cronies" who obtained the projects involved in their construction.

Therein lies a dilemma which the party has to address. The New Economic

Policy, credited as one of the main accomplishments of the party's struggle, may have created (and subsequently expanded) the pool of middle-class Malays and nouveau riche whose wealth is a source of pride for the Malays.

Now, with the party battling money politics within its ranks, the wealthy are targets for suspicion, and even the Prime Minister at one point expressed his personal opinion that extremely wealthy members should not contest for party positions. The party must therefore draw a clearer line demarcating the boundaries between the Malays, business and wealth.

With Umno stung by unfavourable 1999 general election results and hotly wiping out corruption, intense scrutiny was accorded to members with close links to business.

Granted that business and politics are in reality occasionally inter-linked, there has, however, to be the distinction between political power and business influence.

At the same time, even as the delegates thrashed out the motions in this year's Assembly, it was pointed out how the Malays are still under-represented in the economy. But as the party president pointed out in his opening speech, with Umno and the Government sparing no effort to develop Malay businesses, why is it that the community has yet to reach the 30 per cent equity ownership target spelt out by the NEP?

Could it be that the Malays, in failing to develop themselves economically, have been using Umno as a convenient scapegoat to explain their own shortcomings?

Doubtless that there are weaknesses in the implementation of the NEP, but as much as the Government and Umno needs to confront the challenge of drawing a clearer dichotomy between business and politics, the community must also confront its own flaws.

The critics will label such efforts as a desperate attempt by the party to instil fear in order to hold on to power.

But with Dr Mahathir having outlined the blueprint for the Malays, fear of the extinction of the Malay race has now become the necessary component for its continued survival.

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