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More Malays rising to the challenge of defending what is theirs

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WHEN a local Malay daily carried the photograph of a foreigner wearing a pemerhati bahagian (divisional observer) tag, numerous theories, including foreign conspiracy and espionage, were bandied about.

Not surprising, as such a tag was supposed to be reserved for divisional members who had failed to be elected as delegates to the general assembly.

But as it turned out, there was nothing sinister about the "white man".

The Umno secretariat explained that the foreigner, who was from the diplomatic corps, had requested to be allowed to observe the goings-on at the assembly. Since there were no special tags prepared, he was given one reserved for divisional members.

A non-story for journalists covering the assembly, but the fact that the white man with the tag made it into the popular daily reflected several things.

Firstly, it showed to a certain degree how suspicious the Malays are of the "white man".

Secondly, it proved that they are not about to simply open their doors to foreigners or allow them to do whatever they like at the Putra World Trade Centre, one of the few landmarks that the Malays can proudly feel is theirs.

It could also be that the Malays, at least those at the PWTC, felt that they had had enough of the white man showing off his superiority even at other people's "backyard".

Whether such a reaction came following Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech on Thursday, which reminded the delegates of neo-colonialism or otherwise, is anybody's guess.

The bottomline is that there are Malays who care and are alert to the need to prevent their own home from being violated by foreign elements.

After all, that's the least they can do, especially when they can participate in the bigger struggle involving nation-building.

No doubt, it can be argued that such attitude borders on paranoia but the nation's history has shown that part of the downfall of the Malay legacy is due to them being "too trusting" of the "white man".

Wasn't it that this "too trusting" nature had contributed to the infiltration of the Malay States by the British colonialists?

That is the past.

The Malays seem less naive these days, especially if contemporary history of modern-day Malaysia is to be made a reference point.

It was the distrust of the white man which stopped the nation's leadership from blindly accepting the International Monetary Fund prescription when Malaysia was hit by the economic crisis of 1997.

Yet, not all Malays share the sentiments of Dr Mahathir and the rest of the Umno leadership.

In fact, those from the other side of the political divide seem to be more suspicious of fellow Malays than the foreigners, as proven time and again.

The recent political conflict involving former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had seen Malays supporting his cause and turning to the westerners.

Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor even took time to meet Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and the former admitted that in the meeting he discussed Malaysia's internal political problems with the

latter.

Of course, it cannot be concluded that Fadzil was seeking foreign support but the question of why it was necessary to discuss the nation's domestic problems with a leader of an unfriendly nation will eventually appear.

It was interesting that Dr Mahathir, in his winding-up speech, pointed out how members of the foreign media had repeatedly portrayed the Malaysian Government under his leadership as being unfair to the Chinese over issues of education and language.

His reply was equally interesting when he pointed out that these media, be it from the United States, Australia, Canada and several others, were definitely not in the position to judge Malaysia's policies.

After all, he said, Malaysia was probably the only non-Chinese dominated country where the Government allowed and funded Chinese schools.

For a fact, some of these western critics, which have a substantial number of Chinese populace of their own, have never allowed the formation of Chinese schools or encourage Chinese education.

On that score too, Singapore, which is a Chinese-dominated island state, had, in the 1970s abolished all Malay schools, and replaced them with the integrated school system.

What Dr Mahathir said should serve as a reminder to the Malays who had sometimes bent backwards to please others or to be apologetic for the struggle to improve the Malay lot.

It is indeed a difficult task to strike an equilibrium in race-relations in such a diverse nation as Malaysia.

At the same time, citizens who are easily taken in by liberal democratic values promoted by the foreigners seem overly suspicious of their fellow countrymen when it comes to nation building efforts.

The Sekolah Wawasan (Vision Schools) is one fine example used by Dr Mahathir.

Such is the suspicion among the Chinese towards the idea that it is doubtful it will ever be realised.

The Vision Schools concept actually unearthed the selfishness of some Chinese who seemed bent on not wanting to move towards national integration through education.

All this boils down to distrust and the fear that one race is out to shortchange the other.

If such distrust is pursued when dealing with the foreigners, then there is still some consolation.

But it seems that while some Malays at the PWTC showed distrust of the white man, others, both Malays and Chinese, do not.

For these Malays and Chinese, the white man's views are still the best, to be pursued, parroted and trusted.

The only thing they need to do to complete the process is to bow down and say: "Ya, tuan or vely good, master."