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Nation builders spur development

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AS ROME and the Roman Empire was not built in a day, so nations too take time to achieve developed status.

Within any nation there are the nation builders. National development was driven by leaders and masses, by the elites and the common person.

More than the masses, the elites influence and shapes the form, substance and spirit of development.

There are many groups of elites; among the most important are the ruling elites, the religious elites, the civil service elites, the educational elites, the business and corporate elites, the language elites and the professional elites. The intellectuals, the public opinion leaders, the social activists are all members of these various groups.

The first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, known affectionately as Bapa Malaysia, set the emphasis and direction for national development.

In simple but principled terms, he declared: "Books, not bullets."

Since Independence, Malaysia has continued to allocate the largest amount of resources for education.

This policy was observed even during economic crises, including the 1997-1999 recession.

If the country is to be critiqued for its policies in education, it must be for not involving the private sector, the communities and the families in bearing part of the burden of educational financing.

So far the national ideology has been pragmatic, incremental development, responsive to the aspirations from within the country and the challenges and competition from outside the country.

In many ways, the country is moving several steps ahead of scientific-technological, economic and even political changes that are yet to come.

Whatever the debates on the extent of developmental imperatives, the country has always embraced Islamic principles and indigenous culture.

Compared to almost all of the nations which came into existence after World War II, Malaysia remains a democratic nation, not under military rule, dictatorship, absolute monarchy or oligarchy.

Whether defined by the ruling elites or the observer and analyst, signs of development are visible. In the broadest terms, everyone who contributes productively to the economy and everyone else who contributes to the betterment of lives in the nation is a nation builder.

However, in a strict sense, those who carry on their daily activities for their personal benefits without thinking of returning part of their wealth to society, are not nation builders.

To be a nation builder, one must at some point of time think of the nation together with personal interest, and more honourably, think almost selflessly in terms of promoting the welfare of others, even beyond the interests of self.

This act of thinking for the good of the polity prepares one for sacrifices to be made in the journey of leadership.

The ultimate sacrifice for the nation, by the armed forces and by civilians alike, has been, traditionally, life itself.

In recent times, the sacrifice includes the willingness to invest time, energy and wealth, in knowledge development and people development, among others.

In the new sense, the sacrifice of life is indirect. The sacrifice is

not necessarily death, but it is hard work, not for self, but for country, the people and God.

Interestingly, slogans which reflect the above are reminiscent of the colonial slogans of old: "Go East Young Man, for gold, glory, gospel!" History has a way of making mockery of demagogues and pedagogues.

Once before, people were against sending their children to English schools because English was seen as the language of the infidels and would influence Muslim children to become Christians.

Today, English is seen as a language for the repository of Islamic knowledge and for the spread of Islam.

Sometime ago, nationalists took pains to condemn the colonial policy of making the sons of Malay fishermen and farmers better fishermen and farmers. Today, besides venturing into other fields, there is the invitation for Malaysians to become better agriculturists, marine scientists and fishermen as well as establishing farms for fish, crustaceans and crocodiles, deer and ostriches.

Across the generations, nation builders have held on to the cardinal pillars of the national development agenda in Malaysia.

Within the constitutional framework, these principles include the restructuring of society to achieve the goals of national unity, the eradication of poverty, and the improvement of the quality of life.

Nation builders have a passion for formulating and intervening in policies for the good of the people.

The passion for policy must be accompanied with the passion for the implementation of programmes, projects and activities.

As the provisions of infrastructure with physical facilities and amenities are put in place, the national aspirations focus on higher levels of the indicators of the quality of national life.

Recently, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) was established to ensure the meaning and quality of life in terms of human rights.

Other similar organisations are established by the government and non-governmental organisations and the private sectors, all with the aim of filling in the gaps of policies and services to improve the quality of life.

In the final analysis, all nation building efforts must mean the enhancement of lives and the improvement of the quality of life of the community.

At a different level, nation building means civilisation building. Nation builders must not be merely parochial for they are also civilisation builders, because the best of their practices are examples for other communities to emulate.

Malaysia is entering its fifth decade and there are some historical episodes which constitute a collective national memory.

To date, Malaysian history as taught in schools record more of its struggles.

Historians take great efforts to make heroes of many who may actually be parochial rather than national in their outlook.

However, the uncelebrated history of more recent times which have not found their place in the school textbooks encompass the stories of heroes and ordinary people who may be more national and cosmopolitan, although some-what controversial.

If a decade is used as a distinguishing criteria of an intellectual generation, there are at least five post Independence generations of Malaysian intellectuals, elites, leaders and celebrities.

Malaysian universities, and in the early years, foreign universities, contributed to the education of these intellectual elites.

The generational experiences of university life can be seen in parallel to the generational experiences of present leaders. As these people were the early university graduates, they were the early elites, particularly in government, private enterprise and non-governmental organisations.

The first generation were those who were in the University of Singapore and later transferred to the University of Malaya. Examples from this group would be Mahathir Mohamad, Musa Hitam and Adibah Amin.

The second generation includes Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Awang Had Salleh and Anwar Fazal.

The third generation includes Mohamed Jawhar Hassan, Zeti Aziz and Koh Tsu Khoo.

The fourth generation includes Shahrizat Jalil, Saifuddin Abdullah and Abdul Razak Baginda.

The fifth generation includes Hishamuddin Hussein, Mohd Hear Awang, and Azalina Othman Said.

Those who were educated abroad, and who infused the intellectual life of the country in so many ways, include the late Tan Chee Khoo, Senu Abdul Rahman and Lim Kean Siew.

The early generations of elites had a passion for independence, law and order, stability, wealth creation and equitable distribution of wealth, the revival of indigenous culture, the use of the national language as a language of unity, and national sovereignty.

There was considerable overlap in the relationships among the elites. The elites who experienced the changes through the five decades have more generational memories and had to cope more with the forces of change and continuity.

History and politics, planning and chance, geography and technology, elites and common people, religion and science, economics and language all come together to mould and form Malaysian ideas of development. Malaysian social and political ideas of development and progress are dynamic, challenging, refreshing and always in states of being and becoming.

These generational experiences and ideas provide an intellectual canopy under which thinkers are continuously challenged to understand, metaphorically, north and south, east and west and find their bearings in various terra incognita.

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