

02/01/2001

New year brings fresh set of tasks

Abdullah Ahmad

YEAR 2000 has only gone for a day into the silent limbo of the past. I was happy to let it go for it was imperfect for me personally (hospitalisation) and I suppose also for the Barisan Nasional (Lunas), and the Government (the disgraceful heist at two military camps in Grik).

As Brooks Atkinson said in December 31,... "and Thank God that it can go".

As conventional wisdom says, a year's end is neither an end nor a beginning but simply a carrying on, with all the wisdom that experience can instil in us.

The pre-Deepavali, Christmas, Hari Raya and the New Year shopping, parties and reveleries appeared bigger and happier, reflecting, I think, that Malaysians had regained their capacity to spend and, sad to say, for some to squander.

Whatever, it seems that the various races are quite united, accept the de facto and de jure institutions and will defend the time-honoured formula of sharing power that was agreed to by the founding fathers so that Vision 2020 can be realised during its time-frame.

When you ponder, it does occur that many things might have been done and others done differently in the light of experience. I wish the ruling coalition, Umno especially, will be more imaginative, brave and even intellectually combative and innovative towards current issues.

Its old methods and perceptions - goodness knows - have not and nor are they likely to work well in the New Year and beyond.

The Umno ideologues and think tanks, if the party has them, should search for an idea, new parameter, a new captivating slogan and agenda that would set the young Bumiputeras, and even other Malaysians, on fire, and free them from the feeling of social deprivation and seeming political indecision and direction.

As the nation proceeds on a gradual road towards some political maturity, I hope it will eventually evolve into something like a bangsa Malaysia - an amalgam of all the virtues of its three main racial components.

It will succeed only if everyone is totally prepared to forgo his racial advantages. Even if it did in a hundred years' time it shall still be a quite hopelessly uneven and fractured divide, between the city and the kampung, traditional and new, the "haves" and the "disadvantaged"; the rich and the poor, the largely immigrant squatters and numerous foreign beggars who are eyesores at public places.

Something more worthy has to be done and quickly too.

I agree with Askiah Adam, an opposition columnist, that there is a harmful obsession with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's successor and the Prime Minister should no longer entertain these queries with answers.

Dr Mahathir and Umno have already anointed Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The only question is, when the succession will take place.

The last time I saw Dr Mahathir was at his second day open house and I must say this to doubting Harrys and Toms: He did not behave, either through body language, words or actions, like boys and girls do on the last day of the third term of the fifth form.

Dr Mahathir was in good mood and he is rarely given to pretence. He can only do his best, and I suggest let the rakyat judge him in 2004 or earlier.

Dr Mahathir is one year older than Alan Greenspan and Jiang Zemin and, in 2003 when his term as Umno president expires, he will only be 78. Dr Mahathir and Atal Bihari Vajpayee were both born in December 1925 and they will be less than 80 when they face the next polls.

These days they are relatively young men. What young Malaysians, Chinese and Indians must do is to shock these leaders. As George Bernard Shaw said 82 years ago, "It's all the young can do for the old, to shock them and keep them up-to-date."

At least, it is perceived by many that young Malaysian voters and potential voters are doing a good job tormenting the ruling parties, against the cock of the walk in particular.

Not only have Umno and the Government to reinvent themselves, Malaysians also have to do some serious thinking themselves. Either we continue to live in isolation, respectively, as Bumiputeras, Chinese, Indians and others, or become Malaysians, which means more than a notion. Feeling and impulse must be genuinely Malaysian rather than Malay, Chinese or Indian. The nation, peace and prosperity come first, before racial agendas. Let's free ourselves of racial prejudices as much as possible.

Neither the Government nor any of us must compromise racial harmony. It must exist, whatever the cost. The Government must do what it takes to preserve Malaysia as it is, with some prospect of greater tolerance. Extremism of any kind, from whatever stream, must be efficiently, ruthlessly and quickly squashed.

I like to recall my memories of the British Military Administration, the brief Malayan Union, the British Colonial rule and the early years of Merdeka.

The Malays were a ragged race, poor and threadbare. The Chinese, Indians and the Eurasians were better off. One could see all this in Kuala Lumpur, Malacca Ipoh, Penang, even in Johor Baru and Kota Baru, at the Penang Free school, Anderson School, Victoria Institution and at the University of Malaya, technical college and even at the agricultural and teachers training colleges. I paused, long enough to make me wonder what had gone wrong.

There is no question that during the last 29 years (NEP, et al) the Bumiputeras have improved beyond recognition. Still, it is below the target. The other Malaysians, because of their work ethic, prosper and will continue to do so in future. I congratulate them for their great achievements and future accomplishment.

Malaysians are heading for a challenging and tumultuous 2001. The threat of a global economic slowdown, globalisation, the continuing racial polarisation and the Malay political divides; demands for greater democracy, good governance and transparency will mount.

The shaking off of all these effects will require new policies, orientation and different responses, otherwise we are in for a great shock. New issues will surface. Perhaps even scandals.

I have been fighting for a long time - in and out of government - that Malaysia must put a high premium on English (not at the expense of Bahasa Malaysia, of course. It can be done).

Had we not been shortsighted, we would not have been facing problems with the poor standard of English in Malaysia (including in this newspaper). The standard is getting worse by the day among all races, especially the Malays. The Bumiputeras in Sarawak and Sabah by and large have better command of English than their counterparts in the Peninsula.

I would like to see in the New Year a serious effort by the Government to stem the deterioration in an asset we once had. Let's do something concrete about this often debated subject.

I am tired and worried, as many Malaysians are, about Malaysia's

capacity in future to participate actively in the global economy and international relations.

To start with, bring back into service good old English teachers. Stop making our universities into factories churning out mono-lingual workers.

Personally, my stars were off course during the final days of 2000. As is the custom, almost everyone has an event last year which so well retains its character over the years that it becomes or should be a haven in future.

Mine was five days and four nights at Gleneagles Intan hospital watching drowsily some dull TV programme, the social-cum-working visit to Putrajaya, meeting elder relatives, my son's in-laws, the New Year Eve dinner with the family and friends at Citron, which sits on the lovely lush gardens on Stonor Drive and joining thousands of ordinary people at the Petronas Twin Towers, and then to Bangsar to observe Malaysians welcome 2001. It was a happy sight.

Between re-reading George Kennan's containment policy and conferencing via phones and faxes, much to the distress of my wife and my doctors, I thought perhaps Kennan's book should be compulsory reading for Umno leaders and members in tandem with C.C. Too's memoirs.

Kennan advocated and successfully, though it took decades of appropriate American strategy, how to counter the threat of Soviet expansionism in the aftermath of the Second World War and the advent of the Cold War.

Too's book describes how we fought and won against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and his important role in it. Too's offices and mine were next to each other for a year in the Parliament building during the National Operation Council rule.

He who could smell a communist a hundred miles always said I was a Malaysian nationalist. It took "Ghulam" to arrest me as an alleged communist and only after Tun Razak died.

In Malaysia, the struggle for dominance will continue, with the majority seeking and attempting to assert its dominance for itself, while the big minority, advanced and more sophisticated and media savvy, appears to be unwilling to submit and accept the majority as dominant.

Meanwhile, realpolitik has brought the minority's endeavour to a temporary standstill. I believe, in the long run, status quo will be maintained and strengthened.

What is needed is that all constitutional provisions must be scrupulously adhered to and implemented. Law enforcement leaves much to be desired. Lat's cartoon, which was published yesterday, says it all. And that's about mundane things, though important.

While there will always be an explosive potential, I do not believe there will be an ethnic confrontation here if all are sensible, sane and pragmatic.

To reduce potential conflict, the eradication of poverty must transcend race and be scrupulously prosecuted. There should be no recurring talks or even a hint - no matter how subtle - about the long-settled social contract. There will be a level playing field as soon as there is economic parity among Malaysians.

I have been lucky in my 63 years, lucky in 1957 to enter journalism through a deliberate decision, with no qualifications at all except five O-Levels. I am now back full circle. My fervent hope is to see Malaysia continue to prosper, the races to remain united and a serious start will have been made in the New Year to give English the proper place it deserves in our nation.

The end of the year is always an emotional time, a time of reflection and celebration with the family, relatives and friends, the successes (even failures) we have had. Most of us did just that last Sunday. Life is

a struggle, about hope and fulfillment.

As Aristotle said, men cling to life even at the cost of enduring misfortune. Without power men and women are impotent. Thomas Jefferson said an honest leader can feel no pleasure in the exercise of power over his fellow citizens and, if I may add, unless it is absolutely necessary to maintain law and order and the state of the Malaysian Union or federation.

The prize for a general is not a bigger tent but command. For the PM it is the carrot and the big stick.

I wish readers a happy and prosperous 2001 and beyond. Health, long life and happiness. Kita bolehlah.

(END)