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Rising to Dr Mahathir's challenge

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THE Third Outline Perspective Plan or OPP3 was presented to Parliament last Tuesday. This plan marks the beginning of the second phase of Malaysia's drive towards developed nation status by 2020.

It is heartening to hear that many of the objectives of the preceding plan have been realised. It would have been sweeter if it could have been shown that together with the material gains there had also been an enhancement of the noble values of our society.

The last fact remains a mystery as there is no equivalent "morality" index that we can refer to as an indication of whether our society has become more ethical or otherwise. Despite its tremendous success however, it is only natural for a 10-year programme like the OPP to have shortcomings.

The most glaring of these is perhaps the slight decline in the share of Bumiputera ownership of corporate capital from 19.3 per cent in 1990 to 19.1 per cent in 1999.

During the same period, the Chinese share of capital ownership recorded a bigger drop, from 45.5 per cent to 37.9 per cent. The Indians, however, had their ownership increased to 1.5 per cent in 1999.

The clear winner in the last ten years of the country's corporate business is possibly the foreign investor whose ownership increased significantly from 25.4 per cent to 32.7 per cent.

The Government had attributed this increase to the policy of liberalising foreign investment to accelerate the recovery process after the 1997/1998 economic crisis.

Surely, there's something to be learnt here. Although the Bumiputera and Chinese have been working very hard, and on their own soil too with home-ground advantage and all, in terms of performance they still lag behind the foreigners.

A possible reason for this is the fact that we focus too much on the input or outlay, rather than productivity or outcome. Hence, our profit margin is very much reduced although we spend more time and money in carrying out projects.

It is also presumed that foreigners have the upper hand in today's business because they invest more on the "software" rather than "hardware". This is related to using knowledge, skills and experience.

Malaysians certainly do not lack any of these. Our managers and administrators are well qualified, our professionals ably trained. Many, no doubt, have received the best education the world has to offer.

Some are graduates of Ivy League universities, while others have been coached by the best teacher there is. But has the knowledge gained been truly translated into high value products and services?

The Government can only do so much. Adequate infrastructure has been provided. Relevant laws have been enacted. Various financing schemes have been made available.

It is up to the people to reciprocate. Have we worked smart enough? Have we tried hard enough? Have we looked at all the options of doing things? Have we explored beyond that, looking at the not-so-obvious options, the unconventional choices?

In short, in all our endeavours, have we given all that we have?

One area that Malaysians should play a more prominent and vigorous role is in software development. This is because intellectual property creates

far more value than any other industry. Hence, it has become one of the most economically viable areas of the information age.

Many of us carry out research. These studies can be big or small, long-term or short-term, incredibly vital or absolutely mundane. Regardless, the amount of data collected can be substantial.

But if these data are not mined and used to create some sort of software, then the return on investment of our research would surely be disappointing. Software need not be long and complex. Even a simple, custom-written one can expedite many of our routine activities. Needless to say, to develop good software a certain amount of creativity and innovation must be relied on.

Although some Malaysians are already good at writing computer programmes, this culture has yet to permeate our knowledge society. How do we address this issue?

First and foremost, it is expected that those specifically trained in this area become the flag-bearers of our crusade to become a software generating community.

Professors, lecturers and graduates of information and communications technology should consistently churn out software, especially for use in their laboratories and at work. These experts should not, as far as possible, take the easy way out, that is, by simply buying the software that they need.

But if they have to, then they must try to understand the dynamics and procedures of the acquired software thoroughly so that they can modify them for improvements in the future. A good example set by the local ICT experts would surely be the best impetus for many lay people to become interested in software development. They will be less intimidated to get their hands dirty and let their imagination free.

It has often been said that if it wants to compete globally, Malaysia must build a "real" information and communications technology industry that produces innovative indigenous products. The productivity, creativity and skills of its people must grow in tandem with the Government's desire to adopt ICT as the main thrust for growth in the coming ten-year period.

Thus, at the end of his OPP3 speech Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad issued a pertinent challenge to all. The Prime Minister said: "We must be prepared to reinvent ourselves, to change our mindsets, to be innovative, resourceful and disciplined, as well as to have a sense of urgency in the face of increasing challenge."

The next ten years will be a struggle to all Malaysians, regardless of race or creed. The aim is to achieve success and respect for this country and its community. Let's give it all that we have. Let's make this our jihad. The Prophet Muhammad successfully developed a brand of Muslims willing to give it all for the sake of religion and community. Their prowess has become one of the most magnificent stories in the study of civilisations.

In order to understand how these Muslims conducted themselves, one has to read the account that Roman officers gave to their leader, Herculius, when he asked them the reason for their stunning defeat.

They described the qualities of the Muslim fighters whom they had to contend with in the following words:

"During the night it seems they do not belong to this world and have no other business than to pray, and during the day, when one sees them mounted on their horses, one feels they have been doing nothing else all their lives.

"They are great archers and great lancers, yet they are so devoutly religious and remember God so much and so often that one can hardly hear talk about anything else in their company."

This is what jihad is all about - to strive hard in every noble endeavour. Getting rid of harmless artefacts or blowing up defenceless statues is certainly not jihad.