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The Malay dilemma in the 21st century

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MALAY Dilemma Two or the Malay dilemma in the 21st century. This perhaps best describes the presidential address by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at last week's Umno general assembly.

It is almost a "tragedy" that 30 years since the book, *The Malay Dilemma*, was written, "nothing much seems to have changed" and the dilemma remains. Even more "frustrating" is that the delegates appear not to understand the message of their president who has over the years appealed, begged, cried, cajoled, berated them and even prayed.

The theme of last Thursday's address, "Malays Forget Easily", was also summed up in the poem read out by Dr Mahathir during the winding-up on Saturday.

But the dilemma of the Malays, as outlined by Dr Mahathir, spills over and impacts on Malaysian society in general. In a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-ethnic society such as Malaysia, the Malay dilemma is also the Malaysian dilemma. The Malays have a greater responsibility to ensure that they do not forget easily and to resolve their dilemma, not only for the sake of the future of their own race but for the future of the Malaysian nation.

In the book, *The Malay Dilemma*, Dr Mahathir had asked "What went wrong?". Yet, three decades later since the book was first published and "after 43 years of trying, after billions have been spent, after several banks and a variety of funds have been established, today the achievements of Malays in trade and industry are still low".

The question of "What went wrong?" still begs to be answered, even though from a different perspective. Not so much as to why there was "disruption in the even progress and comparative racial harmony that characterised the first 12 years of the independence of Malaysia", but why have Malays forgotten their past struggle, the benefits of cooperation and unity, hard work and their comparative lack of progress in various spheres.

"A race which has been deprived of government assistance has clearly succeeded. Why can't the Malays, who are given all sorts of help, succeed?" Dr Mahathir asked. It certainly is not due to the lack of trying on the part of the Government.

Making no apologies, he said: "We cannot be proud of the achievements of the Malays." Pulling no punches and in hard-hitting, stinging, sarcastic, and at times caustic remarks, he said: "Today, Malays are accustomed to corruption... they are impatient to become rich."

What holds them back? "Malays are not stupid, not unwise, not unintelligent." But they must be prepared to work hard, seek knowledge, master languages and be disciplined. There are no short cuts or an easy passage.

In the book, just as he does in his presidential address, Dr Mahathir stresses the need and importance of education and acquiring knowledge. "Part of the reason for (the) poor showing of Malay students is their chronic poverty and their rural background... In the rural areas they do not even have lights for their children to study by at night," he writes in the book.

Today, the situation is vastly different with the eradication of poverty, government assistance and compulsory education. With numerous opportunities and scholarships, yet many Malay students remain

uninterested. "The Malays apparently have not learned from their history. The Malays easily forget their history. On the contrary, they love to colour their own history with legendary stories for their ego, to comfort and pride themselves in legends which they have created."

Hang Tuah had said that "The Malays will never vanish from this earth." Dr Mahathir, while admitting that this was true today, nevertheless asked: "What kind of Malays have not vanished?" Have they become a race that is successful and with dignity?

He challenged them, adding: "Malays who do not rely on their special rights, who work very hard, are patient, do not wish to get rich quickly, doing things the legitimate way will become Malaysians who are resilient and successful."

Umno members must take up the challenge as they have a greater responsibility to ensure that the Malay society is on par with the others. The majority in society cannot afford to be left behind. "We can do it with hard work. We must have confidence that we can succeed. We have to work for it."

There is no reason why Malays cannot succeed. They can and must, for the sake of all Malaysians. As members of the dominant party in the coalition, they will not only determine the future of their own party and race but the future of the other races and the nation.

But sadly, despite constant reminders, cajoling, appeals and shock, the Malay dilemma remains and so too the dilemma for the nation.

Sadly too, as Dr Mahathir said in his closing speech, many did not even understand or comprehend the message in his presidential address. And one delegate, from Kedah, even suggested that they eat eggs as a means of enhancing their knowledge and brain power. What happened to the president's appeal for hard work, need to acquire knowledge and to prepare for the removal of barriers in an increasingly liberalised and globalised world?

"Have the Malays not learned from their history, especially the 450 years they were colonised; more accurately, their history of British rule? Did they learn from their political history, their economic history, their religious history and their history of knowledge?"

In raising these questions last week, Dr Mahathir was in fact raising many of the same questions and issues he had raised in his book, *The Malay Dilemma*.

The controversial book, first published in 1970, shocked and upset many and the book was even banned. This may not have been totally unexpected as the writer had anticipated that "... it (the book) is most likely to cause dependency among some, and severe resentment among most others".

Just as he wrote in the book's introduction in 1970, Dr Mahathir makes "no apologies" as the "book is not calculated to endear the writer to any particular sections of Malaysians". He has not changed. Dr Mahathir continues to criticise the Malays for not "learning from the past". Again, he makes no apologies and criticises the Malays as well as the Chinese.

In the two hour presidential address entitled, "Malays Forget Easily", Dr Mahathir rebuked the Malays for being weak even after 43 years of independence and being in power in their own country and after all the assistance given to them.

The country's per capita income has risen from US\$300 (US\$1 = RM3.80) before independence to US\$4,000 today. It is recognised as the most progressive of Muslim countries and one that should be emulated and a model for others.

There is full employment and the authorities have shown that Malaysians and Malays are capable of devising policies best suited to their own problems. The homegrown remedies to the 1997-1998 financial crisis

resulted in the country registering V-shaped recovery as well as the fastest gross domestic product growth in 2000.

Yet, the achievements of the Malays are "worrying... they are too complacent, too confident that there will be somebody who will save them, help them. Many of them are confident that regardless of whichever government, it will help them. They are confident their political power will remain and ensure that they will be powerful forever".

He told the delegates that a "start must be made" and they must begin with "discarding the belief that we will be safe no matter what government is in power as it will assist us".

This will not happen. With liberalisation and globalisation, governments are subjected to greater pressures and "Malays will no longer be able to hide behind their special rights, behind NEP (New Economic Policy), behind their borders".

Urging the "Malays to be masters of themselves", Dr Mahathir appealed to the "people not to forget so easily any more because your struggle has not ended", and neither has that of the Malaysian nation.