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Whither Malay businesses?

THE disappointing fact about the economic achievements of the Malays is well known. Despite over three decades of affirmative action, the goal set under the New Economic Policy to help Bumiputeras achieve 30 per cent of the nation's wealth has not been attained. Economist Paul Samuelson once said that nobody really knows why poor countries are poor and rich countries are rich. But the Malays cannot claim ignorance over their poor record in business. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad reminded them of their weaknesses yesterday: they are too impatient to become rich and they still don't possess a good business culture.

What they have is a breed of business people whose existence, it would seem, is to trade in their special privileges for profit. There is another breed who use their positions, also for their own personal gains. What they have in common is an impatience to become filthy rich as quickly as possible. Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, told Umno delegates at the party's general assembly yesterday these people's modus operandi. The individuals would sell every opportunity and allocation given to them. Shares, licences, permits, contracts and others specially allocated to the Malays are immediately sold to non-Malays to gain instant profit. After pocketing the profit, these same individuals will re-apply for the shares, licences, permits and contracts meant for the Malays. Dr Mahathir concluded that the only "business" in which these Malays participate is the sale of their special privileges. He is absolutely right.

Take a reality check. How many Malay individuals out there are really successful in business, good enough to stand tall alongside the great names from the other races, such as Ananda Krishnan, Lim Goh Tong, Francis Yeoh, and Robert Kuok? Take your pick. Halim Saad, Tajudin Ramli, Rashid Hussain, Azman Hashim. These are some of the biggest Malay tycoons the country has produced and they have inspired thousands of other Malays to go out there with greater determination to succeed in what they do. Sadly, however, most of them have seen better days as their business interests succumbed to the impact of the economic downturn caused by the Asian financial crisis of 1997. There are other Malay names in the corporate world, but many serve as Bumiputera partners in businesses created and owned by non-Malays. Of course, there are people like Hassan Merican, Jamaluddin Jarjis, Khalid Ibrahim, and Tengku Tan Sri Mahaleel Tengku Ariff who run their business organisations better than any foreign or non-Malay chief executive officers could have. But Hassan Merican does not own Petronas and, therefore, it is awkward to compare him with, say, Ananda Krishnan.

The question about Malay business achievements has become a moral issue, really. There is little the Government, Umno or Dr Mahathir can do to change the attitude of some Malays. These individuals have been given every opportunity to prove themselves and then prove themselves again. In good times they were helped, in bad times they were rescued. Some of them have done fairly well but many have disappointed. At one extreme, there are Malay business individuals who have failed so many times but continue to be given more opportunities, only to fail again. This is usually not a case of great determination on their part, rather it is one of knowing that the Government will catch them if and when they fall because they are Malays.

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