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Fear, distrust will stifle Malay dynamism

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IT is a troubling question: Is Malay underachievement a state of mind? The call for attitudinal changes by national leaders and the renewed interest in Revolusi Mental seem to suggest it is.

True, we made admirable progress in many areas. But we are also laggards in some. Much has been done by the Government in terms of affirmative action but what explains the academic gap, for instance, between the Chinese and Malays?

From David McClelland's theory of mental viruses (notably, the n-ach or need for achievement) to Alex Inkeles' theory of changing the spirit of man so that he adapts to and promotes modernity to Everett Hegen's psychoanalytical theory of "withdrawal of status respect", all declare attitudinal and value changes as pre-requisites for an achieving society.

We delude ourselves if we continue to point our fingers at the historico-structural legacy of the colonial masters.

At the end of the day, it is values or psychological forces that determine the rate of social and economic growth. The larger the number of people infected by strategic psychological ingredient, the greater the progress of the society.

The n-ach or need for achievement, for example, is reflected in a pattern of thought that says, "do something better than it had ever been done before".

This is visible in many Chinese students: tell them only 4As in STPM will gain them admission in medical or law schools and they will do it.

The imposition of a higher standard does not rattle them. Master IT, intoned the Government. The Chinese quietly do it way ahead of the Malays. Compared to the Chinese, many Malays do not have high mobility aspirations for the self or show willing-ness to take risks.

History shows that the Malays do not have an anti-intellectual culture. Maybe, it has been eclipsed by the shaping and damping of ambitions to fit narrow goals such as the one advocated by orthodox ulama that one child should undertake Quranic memorisation to ensure the parents a place in heaven.

And the cultivation of gratitude for whatever little one has leads to the undervaluing of education and the pursuit of knowledge.

Fear of innovation, distrust of the new and over-dependence on the received wisdom of religious leaders whose orthodoxy hardly inspire dynamism.

To borrow the words of Peruvian intellectual Salazer Bondy, "Underdevelopment is not a collection of statistical indices that enables a socio-economic picture to be drawn.

"It is a state of mind, a way of expression, a form of outlook and a collective personality marked by chronic infirmities and maladjustments."

Those with settled opinion on these issues would have been unsettled by Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's revelations on the plight of the Malays.

The reality is that the Malays are at crossroads. True, their rights and privileges are constitutionally protected.

But unless and until the Malays stand economically and intellectually at par with the Chinese and are willing to forego some dimensions of their rights, the extent to which our society can be morally and culturally pluralistic and equitable remains a troubling question.

The relevance of the affirmative action programme must depend on an open assessment of their fairness and their capacity to move us clearly to a society with social, civil and economic justice for all.

And certainly, it should not serve as a camouflage for exclusion of the others or worse, the sapping of state resources to the point the Malays compromise their self-esteem and integrity.

Affirmative action should remain only when they still prove to be instrumentally valuable in overcoming any socio-economic gaps.

Some criticise Dr Mahathir for washing the dirty linen of the Malays in public. But the failure to address the weaknesses in the open is to nurture a racial welfare system that neither makes the Malays independent nor strengthens their self-esteem.

Dr Mahathir's comments should be seen as an intellectual engagement with the community, one which is dependent on a consciousness that is unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment.

Without a critical response from the Malays, his illuminating remarks become a brief occasion, sentenced to early death by inaction.

Hard as it is, we need to raise embarrassing questions, confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted out and whose *raison d'etre* is to represent all those issues which are swept aside under the rug.

Much will be lost if we could not productively facilitate further critical action and change. After all, the only true path to affirmation of the self is to act, to manifest grit and will, and to create new values. It would be a tragedy if the Malays, over political differences or misplaced pride, feel that they should not be spoken for, articulated and represented by far-sighted leaders like Dr Mahathir.

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