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A time to show off Malayness

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Of course there is currently a raging debate on the "true meaning" of Hari Raya. The new awareness towards religion has redefined the Malays' interpretation of everything from halal food to the way they conduct their daily businesses. Nothing escapes the emphasis on Islam. Apparently "Islamness" has taken the place of "Malayness" in the construction and the transformation of social identity today.

There are many out there who find it "un-Islamic" even to have TV stations airing entertainment programmes on Hari Raya. Siti Nurhaliza and gang are, according to these self-proclaimed guardians of true Islam, nothing less than debasing the true context of the Id. Given the chance, they would rather have religious programmes filling the slots - something that could only have happened in Taliban Afghanistan - if they were competent enough to run a decent TV station, that is.

Precious time is wasted debating the innocent tradition of giving angpow (considered too Chinese) or lighting the pelita (Hindu influence). Hari Raya is supposed to be a very solemn affair (a majority of Malays would beg to differ on that). A relative of mine is fond of giving me long lectures on the need "to go back to Islam" even when celebrating the Id.

"The celebrations are undermining the true spirit of the occasion. The angpow tradition is un-Islamic." Blah. Blah. But he never refuses the money I give him in the same packet given to his children.

See how the Malays have evolved. They used to be a more open-minded, tolerant and positive race. One of the best minds in the discipline of cultural anthropology today, Dr Shamsul Amri Baharuddin of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), in one of his essays, pointed out that the discourse on "Malayness and Islamness" is nothing new in this country.

Syed Sheikh Ahmad Al Hadi, the founder and one of the editors of Al Imam in the early 20s, had argued against "fanaticism and extremism" among his race. Za'ba, probably the best Malay thinker of his generation, had stressed the importance of "positive Islam".

The reformist-minded Syed Sheikh represented the "Kaum Muda" (Young

Turks) among the Malay/Muslim intelligentsia in the 20s. He was influenced by the Muslim intellectual renaissance particularly at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. The backlash from the "traditionalists" was, to say the least, intense. Za'ba was a visionary thinking well ahead of his time.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad too reminded the Malays of their weaknesses in *The Malay Dilemma*. It was not the kind of book that would have made the author popular among the ruling elite at the time of its publication. And it was too bitter a pill to be accepted by the Malays.

He became Prime Minister 11 years after the publication of *The Malay Dilemma*. The book must have some bearing on the ways he handles "Malay issues" as the Prime Minister and the president of Umno. He realised that changing the mindset of the Malays is no easy task. He was candid in admitting he had failed, and in his own words "miserably".

To be fair to him, the Malays have undergone remarkable transformation these last few decades. The New Economic Policy (NEP), implemented after the May 13 incident, despite its flaws, had been responsible for creating a new generation of businessmen and entrepreneurs.

Some are incredibly successful. Admittedly, there are spectacular failures among them, too.

But the Malays cannot survive only with the protection of the NEP. Dr Mahathir has his own agenda. He wanted them to be more competitive, to be world-class workers and to be equipped with a First World mindset.

But Malays being Malays can be notoriously complacent and contented. Priorities are never well defined. Generally, they are not as industrious as they are supposed to be.

The new challenges of information technology and the threats and challenges of globalisation are largely ignored. The divide among the Malays - the haves and the have-nots, the IT literate and those who are not - is dangerously widening. And sadly, after more than three decades, the NEP has not really unshackled the Malays of their dependence on the Government.

Religion is not a uniter among the Malays. The present education system is even scorned for being not Islamic enough by some. Politics does little to bring the various factions to address the real issues of (in Za'ba's words) "the lack of self-reliance and self-confidence among the Malays" even today.

The Malays are not yet to be one of the major "tribes" as defined by Joel Kotkin in his book *The Tribes*. They are probably not powerful and influential enough to be included as one. On the other hand, the Malays have gone beyond the stereotyping of being lazy natives. They have achieved what many other races would have taken generations to do.

If there is such a thing as the search for "a Malayu nation" (a term made popular by Stamford Raffles in the early 1800s), it has to stop here in Malaysia. The Malay diaspora is a concept that has little bearing on the Malays of today.

Even such a lofty ideal as "ketuanan Melayu" (Malay dominance) in the land of the Malays (Tanah Melayu) rings hollow to the new generation of Malays. The Malays should be judged by how well they manage changes and in confronting the unpredictable world of tomorrow.

Perhaps in happier times like these, the Malays should reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Let us think like a Malay for once - reminding ourselves that the religious being within us, again to quote Za'ba, is in fact the basis of Malay survival as a race.

That is why Za'ba insisted on the importance of the practice of "positive Islam". Syed Sheikh argued that Islam could be an important pillar of Malayness "if the kind of Islam they practised was guided by a rationalist orientation and not blind faith and over-concern about the

afterlife".

The moral of the story is, we should not be less Muslim if we strengthened our Malayness, as much as we do not have to be less Malay to be more Muslim. Would that be asking too much today?

* The writer - a farmer and traveller - wishes the readers Selamat Hari Raya. He can be contacted at zulujj@tm.net.my.

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