

19/06/2002

Seize the day, or lose it

Abdullah Ahmad

THREE years before Merdeka, there were about 50 local staff at King's House, the official residence of the British High Commissioner in the Lake Gardens (now a five-star hotel, Seri Negara; the Carcosa, former official residence of the Chief Secretary, is also a hotel though the name remains), made up of butlers, cooks, drinks boys (all Chinese); peons and drivers were Malays, the gardeners Indians.

This was a typical pattern of employment: the British at the top followed by the Chinese, the Malays and the Indians. It was repeated at all levels in British Malaya and colonial society.

Little had changed when the nation celebrated its 10th anniversary of independence on August 31, 1967. I was present at the declaration of Merdeka and the 10th-year celebrations. Within two years, the traumatic May 13 incidents occurred. I was again a witness to its horror, which must never be allowed to repeat itself.

Rather than rechronicle the saga of the race riots and what followed, I will go straight to talk about the present status of the natives on the assumption that you have some basic understanding of Malaysian history.

After nearly 45 years of nationhood, the ethnic equation remains the predominant factor shaping everything: the structure and roles of institutions, determining and defining the priorities of government policy. However, lately, it has been perceived that the rigidity of policy application had been relaxed somewhat.

What is intact is the political system. It still operates very much on the need to accommodate the three main racial players.

Always overheard among some Malays: the Government has not done enough for the race, they must take refuge in religion; they think they are victims of circum-stances in their own fatherland. Rarely heard: how to cope with new realities and fast-changing situations.

Malays must be positive; they are not mired in a hopeless present. Those Malays who've turned inward are doing a great disservice not only to themselves, but to the race they claim they love.

I must assert categorically that our future is bright, not receding. So, stop whingeing! Wake up and shape up, or lose out. Stop blaming the system or anyone but ourselves for what we are and what we will be.

The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has admitted he has, after 21 years, failed to change the Malay mindset: they like to depend on the Government's grace and favour. They love the style more than the substance.

Even some of the young are unreal. I overheard one of them tell his friends, while he sipped a tall glass of cold cappuccino on the terrace of KLCC, that he was ashamed to be a Melayu, he desperately wants to be a Malaysian. His three peers, drinking cold imported Japanese beer (Kirin) listened to him with amused tolerance, chorusing, Sudahlah mu!

He was in a dreamland. How could we tolerate squatter homes, not far from this mall, he intoned to his bored friends. Of course, this 20-something young man has not seen homeless people in New York's Fifth Avenue and in London's Mayfair. If he had (I don't think he has been anywhere outside his Damansara Heights cocoon) then he has gone around with his eyes shut.

He said the Malay language media write nothing except about Melayu and Islam. What does he think Sin Chew Jit Poh and Nanyang write about? Since

he doesn't read Chinese - he appears to know only Malay and English - he is what Malays call katak bawah tempurung.

His friends ordered another round of Kirin. They smiled as a brilliant sun bathed their place in an unusual glow. The infantile idealist became even louder. His friends ignored him.

My expatriate friend found the young man's soliloquy amusing and asked me if he was a typical Malay. I told him he was not; just a lounge critic, not a committed potential suicide bomber.

Some Malays are enraged as they talk and talk about what's perceived as unrelenting provocation, one after another - some real and many imagined - against them.

They warned "these people" not to play with fire, warned against increasing corruption and called for transparency in Government and quick action against the big crooks without fear or favour. During the last general election, the ruling parties suffered because the voters snubbed them. They wanted to teach the Government a lesson.

The Government has reclaimed the voters it has lost and is attracting new ones as well. I have no doubt whatsoever that whenever the next general election is held the people will return the Umno-led coalition, provided they continue to have faith in the Government and Dr Mahathir. Confidence they have, even if they do not revere either, for they know the alternative is unpalatable, perhaps even chaotic.

Looking after the underclass and understanding the middle class is crucial, for they universally believe that the Government could do more for them. They may criticise the Government and Dr Mahathir, but they have not lost faith in the ability of Dr Mahathir and his Government to deliver what he promised:

Cekap, Bersih dan Amanah.

The voters will not walk away from Dr Mahathir and his coalition partners, but they also do not want to wait another generation to get what they perceive as rightly theirs: to free themselves from being perpetually at the mercy of the others' economic and education enclosures.

When I think of the new Malay dilemma - to remain Melayu, to become Malaysian, or Arab or Iranian or just Muslim - I feel like escaping to the mountains for a few weeks to bring myself to write what I really think, publish it and be damned.

Malays appear far too preoccupied with the hereafter that they have forgotten that God also beseeches the ummah to seek contentment and to lead a purposeful life in the here and now. With their vision obscured by the sole goal of dying and going to heaven, many have squandered the opportunity to achieve anything meaningful in their lives and to lead a truly varied and rich life in all senses of the word. Malays have forgotten that they too must strive for earthly treasures.

Too many Malays are contented with ambling through 60 to 70 years of life, where they have achieved nothing nor striven for anything, in return for what they hope would be eternal happiness. But by not making the most of the relatively short time that they have in this world, they would have only wasted Allah's most precious gift to us, the gift of Life. This is the reason why He has turned a deaf ear to most prayers.

We are judged not only by our devotion to God, but also by what we have done to make ourselves good and useful persons and also what we have done for the good of our brothers and sisters, and the ummah. We will not be able to pass His test when we cannot even pass Life's exam, because we remain blinkered as we are now.

Another young idealist (he drinks Kopi-O at roadside stalls) left town a month ago to go back to his ancestral roots in Kelantan - to regain his equilibrium, he e-mailed me. Yesterday he called me to say he was back.

He said his brief stint in Kelantan nearly made him a nervous wreck because of the hypocritical lifestyle, the absence of intellectual life and entertainment, and the prevalent self-caused identity crisis motivated by political Islam.

In style and form they desperately appear to want to be Arabs (little do they realise that a good 15 per cent of the Arabs are not Muslims though they speak and swear in Arabic, dress in Arab clothes and eat Arab food). They live in fantasy. It's chilling, appalling.

The Arabs, on the other hand, are striving to liberate themselves from feudalism and authoritarianism. Just watch the women newscasters on Al-Jazeera and Arabic movies.

The Government must do something really brave before the political climate among the Malays begins shifting too fast (via ignorance and misinformation), or rather, makes young Malays start saying aloud what the cappuccino-dreamer said at a KLCC cafe, that he saw no advantage in being a Malay though he was benefiting from the NEP. Otherwise, how else could he live in Damansara Heights, date a VIP's daughter and simultaneously a rich young widow?

I am glad at least for now, none of the misguided young Malays I know or have heard talk have made martyrdom their goal; change is, I suppose.

It is time the Government stopped Islamic political extremists and communalists on the other side of the divide from hijacking and destroying Malaysian nationalism in the making. They represent exactly the opposite of what Dr Mahathir's Government is trying to do. It's high time the riot act was read. The status quo is not good enough for the future.

I am defying what seems a depressing reality because I am an optimist. I like to continue believing, even steadfastly, that a united Malaysian nation, based on equitable resolution is not only possible, but inevitable. It is just and right, and therefore it shall be. Otherwise, we stand to be hanged together by the extremists of both sides.

The mark of a good Malaysian is to reject extremism of any colour - the only one way to retain safety and prosperity.

If the Malays sit still, all will be lost. If the non-Malays also sit still, Malaysia will never be the same again.

(END)