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Think (Special Report)

HOW THINKERS IN MALAYSIA THINK

By Ravichandran D.J. Paul

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 4 (Bernama) -- "Cogito ergo som" is a Latin phrase by one of the world's greatest thinkers, Rene Descartes, meaning "I think, therefore I am".

The ability to think bestowed on humankind is the key to the rise of civilisations and the success of human endeavours through the ages.

Early last week the art of thinking was analysed in a ground-breaking seminar held here on the thinking power of the human race.

The two-day seminar, something out of the ordinary, began on Aug 29 and was organised by the Research Centre of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

The seminar dwelt into how thinkers think, innovative thinking, creative thinking, thinking during crises, how a crook thinks, the functions of the brain in the thinking process, etc.

It started on a vibrant note with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister, whose wisdom is admired by the nation till today, delivering the keynote address.

The ending was a thought-provoking presentation by Dr Chandra Muzaffar, president of International Movement for a Just World and a man who is known to speak his mind.

The event was an eye opener as it revealed how Malaysians have taken for granted the "thinking process" over the years.

And participants were obviously curious about Dr Mahathir's mind that showed no signs of slowing down in its ability to think although the man himself is now 80 years old.

Just how does this man think? One participant asked if there is any correlation between his diet and his ability to think. Another enquired whether he is the living testimony that the thinking prowess improves with age.

But Dr Mahathir disappointed many when he told the seminar that he thinks just like anyone else and debunked all myths related to his remarkable brilliance.

Maybe the following statement by Dr Mahathir connotes his secret: "I not only think but also look and study things carefully. When I travel around, I look at things carefully, make comparisons of what I see. I don't accept things at face value, you cannot trust what you hear or see. Don't jump to conclusions without thinking."

"In order to make decisions we need to make comparisons," he said and provided the example of how Malaysia tackled the financial crisis in 1997.

"We compared the available options one by one including whether we should consider the IMF (International Monetary Fund) package that would rob us of our sovereignty. Then we selected the best option for the nation."

One should also think deeper and see the meanings in the bigger picture.

On this, Dr Mahathir referred to the imperfection in the thinking of some Muslims that they should go to war on horses as the Sunnah says the Prophet did so. "That does not mean today they have to go to war on horses," he said.

Dr Mahathir explained that the Sunnah in fact profoundly illustrates that Muslims should think of all available resources in defending the Ummah.

As usual, Dr Mahathir was tactful and witty when answering questions from the floor, much to the delight of the audience.

One participant from Mauritius went to the extent of asking whether the Muslim world today owes Malaysia when it comes to thinking. Dr Mahathir humbly replied: "Never, we are not the only fountain of wisdom. There are others."

Dr Mahathir felt that Malaysians must think more as the country still has a long way to go in development. He wanted Malaysians to change their mindset and accept the fact that there are others who are better and more successful than us.

While Dr Mahathir pondered on how a thinker thinks, Dr Chandra Muzaffar ventured into the "thinking process" in the country since independence.

Dr Chandra revealed many interesting points especially when he remarked that Malaysia has proven the fact that you don't need many thinkers as leaders in order to be successful.

At the same time he also pointed out that Malaysia has seen a great deal of thinking with the dominant mode being the ethnic and religious paradigms within a plural society. He said deep inside, the forefathers of this country had thought beyond what we see today.

He recalled that among the past leaders of this country only Dr Mahathir has shown the attributes of a thinker.

In fact Malaysia's father of independence Tunku Abdul Rahman was not much of a thinker but was known for his strong intuition, his successor Tun Abdul Razak was a brilliant administrator and Tun Hussein Onn was a man of the highest integrity.

Yet this is where the paradox is, he said. Countries like India that gained independence much earlier had great thinkers who framed the constitution, among them Jawaharlal Nehru, a brilliant mind, and the second president S. Radhakrishnan, a philosopher.

Yet India failed to shine until of late. But Malaysia, within a short period of 48 years after independence, is being marveled by the world for its achievements.

Despite our sterling achievements, Dr Chandra contended that there are signs of complacency setting in, at least in our attitude towards thinking. He pointed out the proposal by Malaysia Airlines and Proton to appoint foreigners as their CEOs as an interesting example.

Dr Chandra said by doing so, "what we actually want to do is let the foreigners think for us. This is what we see in the rich Middle East countries where foreigners are actually doing all the thinking and they are the ones running the show."

Earlier in his keynote address Dr Mahathir also voiced his dismay over the proposals and said sadly this seems to be the thinking in the country today.

Dr Chandra was also disenchanted with the minds of the intelligentsia in the country. "I think the static thinking of the intelligentsia is a major problem by large due to its uncritical attitude towards power and authority. They seem to be hesitant when it comes to scrutinising power and the workings of power."

The seminar also exposed poor thinking in the local media. There are hardly any thought-provoking articles or those that portray reflective thinking, Dr Chandra lamented.

Unlike their counterparts in the developed countries, the media here seem to be mere followers of what the rulers of the world say, he said.

He pointed to the clever ruse of Israel in Gaza (where the Israelis dismantled a few settlements in a blaze of publicity while quietly expanded settlement in the occupied West Bank) and the so-called globalisation that hardly received any critical assessment in the local media.

Earlier Datuk A. Kadir Jasin, a veteran journalist, who spoke on "how a journalist thinks", noted that the media here appear to have franchised thinking to a few thinkers like Dr Mahathir.

"But it is most unfortunate that we don't have many Dr Mahathirs" said the Editor-in-Chief of Berita Publishing Sdn Bhd.

While the seminar enlightened participants on how people -- from great thinkers to crooks -- think, the evidence of a thinking process that is flawed or lacking in our society is manifested in mundane problems like littering, lack of civic consciousness, road rage and social ills.

Fortunately, however, as pointed out in the seminar, we don't have to have great thinkers to solve the societal problems of the day or wait for a great thinker to emerge to help us out.

All we need to do is change the way we think for the better.

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