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All excited about closer ties with China

By Kalimullah Hassan

IT is mind-boggling, Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, a frequent visitor to China, says of the country's pace of progress. One of the Cabinet's most senior members, Keng Yaik is like an excited small child when talking about China.

He rattles on about the size of China's national grid; about the tunnels they build for supplying water, comparing it with the Pahang-Selangor water pipeline; and about the cost-savings in hydro-electric projects.

And he is constantly harassing aides and friends to set up meetings with Chinese water and energy officials in Beijing and Shanghai.

Keng Yaik was among the nine ministers in Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's official entourage on his five-day visit to China which ends tomorrow.

It was so refreshing to see people like Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who came almost a week earlier, and Datuk Dr Jamaludin Jarjis getting all starry-eyed when studying and looking at the prospects of agriculture and biotechnology that Malaysia can benefit from.

Just like some of the young Malaysian businessmen like Datuk David Yeat who pursue Chinese biotechnology with zeal, with the dream of making Malaysia a leading player in the field. And for none was the zeal and excitement more than Abdullah himself who in all his meetings and briefings did not cease to be staggered by the hyper activity of powerhouse China.

Learn from China. Think long-term. Build relationships. That was the incessant message from the Prime Minister.

Abdullah's passion was catching on as reflected in the excitement of his most senior, trusted and able ministers like Keng Yaik and Muhyiddin; or among many of the businessmen who sought that little official sanction of the Prime Minister's trip to open doors.

And China is changing. So fast. And for the better, in many ways.

Go back 56 years in Malaysia. It is the beginning of the communist insurgency. Growing up in this blessed land then, we had so many hang-ups about China.

Communist China was how we would refer to it. China tacitly supported the Communist Party of Malaya which was terrorising Malaysia.

Hundreds of our brave men - Malay, Iban, Senoi soldiers, Indian and Chinese police officers - laid down their lives fighting the CPM.

China was not that good a word and it was impossible for any Malaysian to visit that country. Until a visionary second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein first braved international sentiment to shake hands with Mao Zedong in Beijing.

Thirty years later, Abdullah has come to China to mark that historic occasion and bring relations between the two countries - one of the closest bilateral associations for both - to new and higher levels.

The suspicions of yesteryears are totally non-existent. Malaysian businessmen of all ilks and ethnicities look hungrily for opportunities.

After Razak, the man most responsible for building and strengthening relations is former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

That passion was passed on to his successor, Abdullah.

Malaysia is fortunate that it also has a committed diplomat in Ambassador Datuk Abdul Majid Khan in Beijing for the last six years. He is

much sought after by Malaysians for his insight, knowledge and experience in dealing with the Chinese.

From the top to the bottom levels of officialdom and free enterprise, the visit of the Malaysian delegation was something that had to be seen to be appreciated and it was something that gives hope to Malaysia as a country and Malaysians as a people that the link between the two countries could only be beneficial.

A CHANGING CHINA

THE first time I was in China was in 1991. It was already opening up but still lacking in many areas - infrastructure, social development, commerce and mindset.

But 13 years later, I can only say that every new moment, every new sight was not only education, but like an aphrodisiac for the mind.

Several other journalists, officials and businessmen were on that same flight that landed at Beijing International Airport last Tuesday morning.

When a plane lands in Malaysia, passengers are warned against the trafficking of drugs that carries a death sentence. In Beijing, we were advised that the airport's security officials did not want passengers to bring in newspapers.

What has changed in China, you would wonder. No access to information? God, aren't we lucky in Malaysia that anyone can slander another on a blog, websites and through the SMS and poison-pen letters?

But as we got off the plane, and with each passing day, we learnt new things and at the end of it, the paranoia of Beijing Airport security with foreign newspapers did not merit much thought.

The greater freedoms would come. It would be an irreversible process. There would be a day, not too far in the future, when China would have the freedoms that Malaysians have taken for granted.

On the streets, the Chinese peasantry, working class and elite alike, have shed the drab Mao suits, which were still pretty much in evidence just a decade ago, for colourful garb while branded goods are not a luxury available only at the Friendship Stores for foreigners.

It seems like it's capitalism all the way and you begin to wonder where the communists and the socialists are.

I left my credit card holder with all my plastic on my seat and not until I was about to check in at the China World Hotel, owned by Malaysian Robert Kuok, did I realise that my security blanket was not there.

The concierge at the hotel was informed of the flight details and seat number, and she invited me to have coffee while waiting.

Within minutes, my daughter called from Kuala Lumpur and said Malaysia Airlines in Beijing had found my plastic and were trying to locate me.

Just as I approached the concierge, she cheerfully informed me that the hotel staff were on their way to the airport to pick up my credit cards.

An efficient MAS; an equally efficient, cheerful Chinese hotel concierge. Even in many countries of the developed West, you do not see such courtesy and efficiency.

On the streets, young couples hug, kiss and walk hand-in-hand in public, displaying none of the taboos of the Cultural Revolution.

Maybe that is an area some overzealous Ipoh City Council or Kuala Lumpur City Hall enforcement officers could learn. Let the young be young.

In the hotels, service is impeccable and surprise of surprises...many of them speak good English like we used to in Malaysia.

But Malaysia is changing fast and in a few years, maybe, we will again be the regional centre of excellence in English education.

The highways, the skyscrapers, the X5s, Cayennes, Mercedes SL55AMGs, the uninterrupted power supply, the clean water, the variety of good food - China has changed and is constantly changing.

Pardon me for being awed. It is just the kampung boy in me that cannot imagine Komunis Cina could be what it is today.

THANKLESS JOB

IT was by chance that I ran into former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam at the Great Wall Sheraton. He is a regular China visitor and gives talks at conferences and universities.

Like all the rest, he was excited about China.

We had a drink and it was only after he had left that I realised Musa had not brought up anything about a column written by my colleague Syed Nadzri Harun a week ago, which took the mickey out of him for advocating a repeal of Malaysia's media laws.

One of Malaysia's understated but better writers, Syed Nadzri had subtly pointed out that the very laws that Musa was talking about repealing had indeed been passed in Parliament when Musa himself was Home Minister in the 1980s.

But that is Musa. One of Malaysia's finer sons who takes criticism as part and parcel of his vocation.

And when Musa speaks about repealing such laws, those who know him cannot doubt his sincerity, no matter what the history.

In recent weeks, much has been said about Press freedom in Malaysia. After more than eight years out of the Press, I find that the attitudes of both politicians and bureaucrats towards the media take longer to change.

In five months back as a journalist, I again begin to see how thankless a job it really is. Fulfilling at times, satisfying at others, exciting, but, still thankless.

Everyone is an expert. There are journalist wannabes who attack editors like The Star's Wong Sulong and people like me, expecting us to guide editorial policy the way they think it should be.

Never mind that they have never been journalists for even a day but they have opinions on everything.

When Sulong, Ho Kay Tat, Gunasegaram of The Edge and I don't do what they do, we are libelled and slandered. Even racial slurs are thrown at us.

And these "good men" talk about Press freedom? God forbid they ever have a say in decision-making or head a newspaper.

Then there are the petty bureaucrats who see an agenda behind any article that expresses an alternative view. Or politiciansaaah, politicians, opposition or government alike.

The opposition politicians attack us in their party organs or websites: the government politicians use all their "power" and might to pressure, slander and libel us so that we will only be complimentary about them.

But then, where would the fun be if we were merely a replica of the Pravda of old?

An editor at another newspaper who has been on the receiving end of some venomous attacks says that if we are nice to the "bloggers" and acknowledge their "power", they will lay off us.

But senior editors at other newspapers and I do not believe in being intimidated by such petty slander and racial slurs, painful though it may be.

We have discussed this many times and we see great hope and expectation in Abdullah's openness and commitment to greater freedoms.

The Malaysian Press has it much easier now than in recent memory, and the atmosphere is, to be unimaginative in my choice of words, great.

And just like China, I believe we will see greater changes in the area of Press freedom in the months and years to come.

When bureaucrats and politicians see criticism in the light it is made, when journalists and bloggers do not pursue personal agendas, and when

editors do not get labelled anarchists for doing the right thing,
Malaysia would have taken that extra step. Amen.

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