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A Malaysian Nobel laureate?

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SINCE 1901, one of the most anticipated events every year within the scientific community has been the announcement of the Nobel Prize winners in December. While the deliberations are done in absolute secrecy, the announcement generally makes headlines around the world. The winners are toasted and the laureates' homelands bask in glory, appreciating the genius of their countrymen.

There are six Nobel Prize winners every year representing six fields of human endeavour - physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, economics and peace. The laureates are those who have engendered original and often revolutionary contribution to their respective areas and consequently to mankind. The prizes are given without discrimination. In his will, Alfred Nobel, the Swedish benefactor of the Nobel Awards, wrote, 'It is my express wish that in awarding the prizes no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates, but that the most worthy shall receive the prize, whether he be a Scandinavian or not.'

Yet for the last hundred years or so, this honour has gone to relatively few countries. The exalted assemblage consists predominantly of Western countries, with Americans dominating the list. According to a recent report on Nobel Prize winners by Sutton Trust, Americans have won over half of the prizes since 1970. In fact the figure is closer to two-thirds these days. Only 22 out of the 533 prizes awarded so far had gone to people outside North America and Europe. The few Asian countries in this elite grouping include Japan, China, Taiwan and India.

Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, have never won a Nobel Prize in the three science categories. This fact alludes to the probability that there could be inherent weaknesses in the way science and technology related research and development (R&D) is addressed within the academic and corporate sectors in these countries.

In Malaysia, there also appears to be a lack of coherent strategy to drive the research activities on all fronts. It is not a coincidence that most of the Nobel Prize winners come from developed countries, which place strong emphasis on R&D work. A quick look at the number of patents filed in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office last year shows the dominance of American and Japanese companies such as General Electric, IBM, Canon and Hitachi.

Many in Malaysia will probably have allowed the matter to slide if not for the call by the former prime minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in 1998 for Malaysians to strive for a Nobel Prize by 2020. While the appeal has not galvanised the country as it rightfully should have, it did help highlight some of the issues that could possibly impair the country's ability to achieve the targeted landmark.

Some of these include the lack of available resources and culture within the scientific community. But are these truly major impediments, or merely challenges that can be overcome by a little ingenuity, and a huge dose of willpower?

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