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'Our thinkers have global reach'

By Sumitha Martin

THE assertion that local thinkers are parochial in their outlook has been strongly refuted, reports SUMITHA MARTIN in the final instalment of a two-parter on intellectual development in Malaysia.

MALAYSIAN thinkers are global in their perspective and some have even made significant contributions to the international community, local intellectuals insist.

Dr Chandra Muzaffar, one of Malaysia's leading human rights and civil society advocates, finds the observation that Malaysian intellectuals are unable to fully critique globalisation, world power structures and injustices in access to resources, as "very odd".

Responding to the assertion by Asian Studies scholar Dr Deborah Johnson as reported in Learning Curve last week, he says, "Look at what some of us have been doing for a long while."

An example of international issues and major intellectual challenges which local thinkers have responded to, says the International Movement for a Just World (JUST) president, is the role of religion in contemporary society and related issues such as its "impact on the future and its interface with secularism".

He calls Johnson's observation that Malaysian thinkers are parochial "a generalisation".

That there are intellectuals "who focus on Malaysia, such as problems on ethnicity and others who "focus on issues which are more global", does not make the former group parochial.

It is merely "their choice and the way they feel they should respond for the future of humankind".

Chandra adds that such a situation is existent in most societies including the developed West because "the majority of people would be concerned about their own society".

Having said that, he observes, "it would be good if in Malaysia and other countries, more and more thinking people reflected on the global scene" for it is the global economy which determines domestic "levels of employment, the language we use, the clothes we wear, food we consume and movies we watch".

He also concedes that while the country has its share of internationalists, intellectual development in Malaysia has been stunted. (See next page)

Johnson, the Malaysia-Australia Fellow 2004 at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation (Atma) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, recorded her observations in a paper entitled Malaysian Intellectuals: A Genealogy of 20th century Discourse and presented at a seminar recently.

She had also observed that the "relatively tame/tamed" NGO or civil society arena and mass media and the legal and structural restrictions placed on public engagement point to the difficulty "for alternative voices and views to get a hearing and full consideration".

Accordingly, she had cited, as examples, an active environmental movement with "little real bureaucratic muscle or regulatory teeth" and a consumer movement which "though active, does not receive much attention".

This analysis, says Chandra, is off-tangent because the issue here is the fact that it is "the State which has failed to respond to the concerns articulated by civil society movements".

A more important point, he adds, is the fact that "Governments very

often respond to civil society but the response is slow".

Such instances in Malaysia include the existence of the Human Rights Commission - a move that is leaps and bounds from the situation in the 1970s when social action group Aliran, which Chandra co-founded, was a "lone voice" in advocating human rights and when the very term itself was "not respected".

Such progress is testimony to the "tremendous perseverance within civil society in this country".

Also disputing Johnson's analysis is social anthropologist and commentator Professor Shamsul Amri.

In an e-mail from Copenhagen, Shamsul cites the following Malaysians who have had a "global reach: Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj and his Commonwealthwide and much appreciated anti-apartheid concerns, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his exemplary economic acumen, Ungku Aziz and his deeply impressive concern for the process of creating a sustainable social collective, in the form of cooperative organisations, Syed Hussein Alatas for turning his antiorientalism academic analysis into a public advocacy platform, and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas for his reflection and rethinking in the field of Islamic thought that has reached all corners of the Islamic world and whose artistic articulations and expressions are indelibly inscribed in various art forms in Malaysia and around the world".

Like Chandra, the director of both Atma and the Institute of Occidental Studies, points out that "there are Malaysian intellectuals who have made it to the global stage and there are those who are happy to address domestic matters".

"What's wrong with that?" he questions.

He observes that in the context of Malaya having been created in 1957 and Malaysia in 1963, "the majority of Malaysian intellectuals have great influence in the domestic sphere."

And interestingly, the country's few intellectuals of international stature "are actually on high demand elsewhere".

He also believes that "where Malaysia is now in economic and socio-political terms, is the manifestation of the scholarship and intellectual capacity of Malaysians".

Women's movement activist Ivy Josiah agrees in part with Johnson's analysis.

Josiah, Women's Aid Organisation executive-director, agrees that Malaysian intellectuals tend to be parochial.

"We can only talk about what's happening in our country or echo the government."

She questions, "Do we critique what is happening in the region? Are we looking at shrinking spaces of democracy within the region or the impact of Islamisation in Indonesia or growing fundamentalism in India?"

Josiah also notes that "space" has not been given and public discourse not allowed for issues such as the dilemma faced by asylum seekers.

She cites the example "not too long ago" of a young activist who wrote an article on asylum seekers from Aceh for local newspapers but "that space wasn't allowed".

During her participation at overseas women's group meetings, delegates from India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are "articulate and critical of capitalism and industrialisation".

"We don't seem to have that sort of discourse in this country," she says.

On the other hand, Josiah notes the country's women's movement has been "very critical and links regional and global issues to the local scene".

For examples, she cites the recent trend to "take away progressive

language in UN documents" and the questioning of reproductive rights and the role of the family - developments which have been taken cognizance of by movements here.

There is also "a lot more debate going on in the vernacular papers, particularly the Chinese papers and websites".

More importantly, she notes that "we have amazing minds here but no freedom of expression".

Discourse on issues such as the air pollution index or religious authorities' scope and power cannot take place because they are labelled with terms such as "sensitive" or "national threat".

To Josiah therefore, the more pertinent issue relating to intellectual growth is the need for freedom of expression and accordingly, the ability to "agree to disagree".

Similarly, Dr Ahmad Murad Merican, associate professor and director of Universiti Teknologi Mara's Centre for Intellectual History and Malay Thought, agrees and disagrees with Johnson.

He stresses, "Like any intellectual community, those (intellectuals) in Malaysia are not culturally and politically monolithic" and "quite a few intellectuals have transcended the Malaysian-centric position".

However he notes that "the general tenor of Western exceptionalism still preoccupies the mind of the Malaysian intellectual. As a result, Malaysian intellectuals are unable to reject dominant discourses and go beyond the rarefied polarities of Islamic versus Global, East versus West, Asia versus Europe or even traditional versus modern".

(END) Source : New Straits Times