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On freeing minds from prejudice

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TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad was conferred an honorary doctorate by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia on Dec 4. It was an occasion mixed with both informality and pomp.

Universities are traditionally the places where young people could and would voice out their dissatisfaction with the government and politicians.

However, on that morning, crowds of students lined the sides of the road leading up to the convocation hall.

Those of us who were there to greet Dr Mahathir knew he had arrived when loud cheers arose from the students.

To my MTV-orientated mind (four of my six children are teenagers) such a welcome would put a smile on the face of the hardest-to-please pop divas: Mariah Carey or Jennifer Lopez would have been happy with such whoops of delight, screams and shouts. In a word: Wow!

Another thing that remain vividly in my mind was not the formality of the ceremony or how impressive everyone looked in their gowns and bonnets but the sight of a woman security officer, obviously not of senior rank, hesitantly holding out her hands towards Dr Mahathir for a salam, and how, without any hesitation he stopped walking and took time to greet her.

Tun Dr Siti Hasmah also responded in the same way. The sight of both of them doing so impressed me.

Here were a couple who had met kings and presidents, who had attended world conferences and national events but who still retained that common touch which rightly has endeared them to so many Malaysians.

I use these two examples of Dr Mahathir's impact on Malaysian citizens because they fit in with the contents of his speech that he gave on that day itself.

In many ways, his speech was not directed solely for the academicians or the graduates who were present, nor just the politicians, but also all who have an interest in their own place within society, regardless of their professions (as security guards) or their ambitions (as students).

After having received the honorary doctorate scroll from the Sultanah of Johor, the Chancellor of UTM, Dr Mahathir delivered his speech.

He touched on colonisation by Western powers that had been part of our history for the last 400 years.

I am familiar with the "colonial" theme that peppered many of Dr Mahathir's speeches. But on this morning, he went further with the theme of "colonisation".

He added a new idea for us all to think about. Could it be that even after Merdeka we are still being colonised? Surely not.

Dr Mahathir's theme that day concerned the "colonisation of the mind". Obviously, if we do not exert our will, our minds can be flooded with the ideas and ideals of those who consider themselves senior, better or more intelligent than us.

Dr Mahathir, however, did not offer any solutions to such a problem. He finished the speech with a question rather than a resounding full-stop. So, what were we to think of his ideas?

The answer is quite simple: we should be able to think for ourselves. If we can do so then we have proven that our minds have not been colonised by any one person or body.

This concept of the colonisation of the mind intrigued me. What Dr Mahathir said caused me to wonder if I too had a mind already influenced by the thoughts of others. I had to admit that it has.

That speech was the impetus I needed to jog a mind grown lazy by only absorbing what I saw and read, and to be led by the nose by the opinions of journalists or analysts on the stage of the world media.

It was therefore with great excitement that I chanced upon an article written in an American magazine which questioned democracy as we know it, which of course is a direct result from believing what politicians the world over - especially in the West - have made us to believe as having seeds of truth.

(It could be argued that politicians and truth make strange bedfellows but that is another matter altogether, and will not be discussed here.)

In "Democracy and its Global Roots" (The New Republic, Oct 6, 2003), Amartya Sen, the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998, insists that democracy is not a concept owned exclusively by the West.

More than anything else, I was attracted to Sen's reference to Iman Ali bin abi Taleb who, during the 7th century, said that "no wealth can profit you more than the mind" because it validated Dr Mahathir's encouragement to us to decolonise our minds.

Malaysians, encouraged by Dr Mahathir, have lately chaffed at the notion that Western powers can bestow democracy upon countries of their choice: that with a magic wand, a country used to warlords and guerilla fighters can suddenly change and accept what the West has offered them.

Sen, a world away in the hallowed halls of academia in Cambridge, wrote: "The apparent Western modesty that takes the form of a humble reluctance to promote "Western ideas of democracy" in the non-Western world includes an imperious appropriation of a global heritage as exclusively the West's own."

If we accept without questioning that democracy was created in the West, then indeed our minds have been "colonised".

We need people like Sen to nudge our preconceived ideas to question this widely-held belief:

"The idea that democracy is an essentially Western notion is sometimes linked to the practice of voting and elections in ancient Greece, specifically in Athens from the fifth century BC.

The term "democracy" derives from the Greek words for "people" (demos) and "authority" (kratia)."

Democracy should be a whole lot more: "Seeing democracy in terms of public reasoning, as "government by discussion" ...helps us to identify the far-reaching historical roots of democratic ideas across the world."

So who then have set examples of "government by discussion"?

Nelson Mandela wrote about his experiences as a young boy while attending the local meetings held in the regent's house in Mqhekezweni:

"Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form ...everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man ...landowner and labourer ...all men were free to voice their opinions..." (Long Walk to Freedom by Nelson Mandela)

Much earlier in time, during the 1590s, Akbar, the Mughal emperor, made "pronouncements ...on the need for tolerance and was busy arranging dialogues between people of different faiths (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains, Jews, and even atheists)" while "the Inquisitions were still taking place in Europe with considerable vehemence."

The political priorities that Akbar displayed as a ruler in India can be contrasted with the democracy that the West boasted of, and at a time in history that Europeans do not wish to remember.

Also in the East, particularly in India, in East and Southeast Asia, Buddhist intellectuals held general meetings to settle disputes: "they helped to establish the practice of open discussion on contentious issues. The largest of these councils - the third - occurred under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka in the third century BC in Pataliputra, then the capital of India."

Sen also noted that in the early 7th century, the Buddhist Prince Shotoku, regent to his mother, Empress Suiko, sent missions to China so that he could learn more about their art and literature, among other

things, and also "introduced a relatively liberal constitution or kempo ...in 640 AD."

This institution insisted that "decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. They should be discussed with many".

Most importantly, it advised: "Nor let us be resentful when others differ from us. For all men have hearts, and each heart has its own leanings. Their right is our wrong, and our right is their wrong."

Perhaps Dr Mahathir has encouraged me to free my mind from preconceived ideas, from listening or reading from the ideals of any one political party, and has led me to wonder about unanswered questions.

If we have hearts, we will continue to wonder about all the "whys", but it should not stop us from accepting the fact that we are mere mortals, and will make mistakes all our lives, whether it is during the bloom of youth or in the autumn of our lives.

In accepting all the brickbats, the barbs of criticisms and the hurt at being constantly misquoted during the 22 years he worked as our Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir has proven he has a heart.

Now it is our turn to prove we are worthy of his heart and that on the world stage, we are worthy of his encouragement to free ourselves from being dictated to in the matters of the mind.