

01/07/2003

We need a Dr M Library to share his legacy with future generations

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AN institution. A library. A university. A Think Tank. How shall we preserve and utilise the distinctive legacy of our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad?

Where we are today is found in the diaries of Dr Mahathir. The euphoria over Malaysia's standing in the world today was not conjured overnight. It was 23 years of Dr Mahathir's vision that some, in the past, had even myopically dismissed as unattainable idealism.

Today, he has created a Malaysia that has visibly changed in size, stature and character and Mahathir's Malaysia has become a role model for many Third World countries.

What were his strategies, thoughts, philosophy and strength in taking Malaysia to such great heights? We cannot freeze his era in a time capsule as a mechanical compilation of data.

Instead, we need to utilise his work to ignite, or rather fire up, discussions, debates and evolve into greater ideas for generations to come.

Last week, during the Umno general assembly, there was talk about setting up a Think Tank, "The Dr Mahathir Mohamad Institute of Strategic Thinking", as a mechanism to view and understand the Prime Minister's solutions on contemporary issues.

There were suggestions of something similar to the think tanks of Heritage Foundation or the Brookings Institution. But, I believe while we embark on this, we need to set up a library in the league of the United States Presidential libraries, so that everything under Dr Mahathir's administration is meticulously documented.

Just to cite an example: The John F. Kennedy Library has 36 million pages of documents, 30,000 books, 200,000 still photographs, 7,550,000 feet of motion picture film, 1,200 hours of video recordings, over 7,000 hours of audio recordings and 500 original editorial cartoons. Kennedy was president for only three-and-a-half years.

Our Prime Minister, as one of the world's longest serving leaders, has led the country for 23 years. Our historical inheritance from our leader should be comparably much more.

There should be biographies, quotations, diary entries, records, memoranda, letters, official documents, minutes of meetings, audiovisuals and even cartoons. And of course, his speeches which are usually provocative, insightful and hardhitting.

Much of Dr Mahathir's work is already in books. I just read his book, Reflections on Asia, in which he says: "What we require is not a single formula but a hundred different policies, approaches and actions." Can you imagine the evolution of his thoughts to arrive at these formulae?

It was the Mahathirian paradigm that changed the face of Malaysia from a commodity-based economy into a manufacturing centre and we are now moving towards a knowledge-based economy.

Today's dramatic infrastructure developments - the world's tallest buildings, roads, ports and airports, high-tech firms, our own car, a ministry for women and an entire new administrative city, Putrajaya - did not just happen. It was hard work.

And there are also so many interesting questions on his views on democracy - whether he sacrificed the primacy of the individual for the benefit of society at large. Today, under present circumstances, less is

talked about because of the sensitivities around it.

However, in generations to come, with greater democratic awakening, scholars, thinkers and analysts may scrutinise, for instance the ever troubling "Operasi Lalang" episode or the sacking of his deputy. Is it not better that Dr Mahathir's innermost thoughts on such matters, be clarified and recorded in great detail so that future political debate would be more constructive?

What about previously and presently classified materials? Will they be available or open to the public in say a couple of decades? For instance, the Kennedy Library is currently undergoing an unprecedented declassification effort. Will we do the same?

The other thing that has to be captured is Malaysia's foreign policies under Dr Mahathir. Starting with his early days with the Look East Policy, antiapartheid stand and his unwavering support of the Palestinian cause, Dr Mahathir has always fascinated us with his independent stand on world politics. Some of his public statements on world leaders are of historical significance.

Along with that, we need to study the contours of his relationships and his direct communication with other leaders in the form of letters, reports and telegrams.

During his tenure, there were many high dramas internationally. How did he react to all this?

Why did he not sacrifice his principles on matters that were accepted by Asian leaders? What was his foresight in shunning IMF help and instead implementing controversial currency controls?

Hopefully, much of the oral histories and memoirs have been recorded or published while these events took place. Editorials, commentaries and opinion on such relationships are already compiled to unfold the stories behind it.

To do this, we need collaboration between academicians, scholars, editors, journalists, researchers and the government departments to ensure that there are no errors or omission of details.

The story of Dr Mahathir is a fascinating one of adventure, courage, dedication and service. The library should reveal the unique influences and challenges which shaped the country under his exceptional leadership, especially during times of crisis.

We have to bring together the records of the past and house them in buildings where they will be preserved for scholars to interpret for our children in the future.

Malaysia needs heroes. Dr Mahathir, more or less discovered the present Malaysia and should be studied in great detail so that he remains our hero for a long time.