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Let history be our guide

A Kadir Jasin

HISTORY doesn't seem to matter much to a lot of people these days. More so if they are Malaysians. In fact, Malaysians are getting progressively weaker in the subject, not only as it relates to the education system, but also in everyday life.

Mudah lupa (forgetting easily) is no longer a malady of the Malays, although Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his 2001 address to the Umno General Assembly, had associated it with the Malays. He said, Melayu mudah lupa (the Malays forget easily).

How can they not forget when in schools history is no longer treated as an important subject. In the 2002 Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination, history recorded among the lowest scores among the core subjects - 70 per cent.

Out of 350,701 government school candidates who sat for the paper, only 5.7 per cent obtained distinctions. Just over 30 per cent obtained credits while 34 per cent managed to pass.

Yet, only a few decades ago, history was an important subject, not so much for us to remember the past but to know who we were and on that knowledge build the foundation for the future.

Sadly, it seems that some bright chaps got this nasty idea that history was bad for children because some history books told negative things about the then-Malaya and Malaysians and great things about the Empire. And since Malaysians are generally uninterested in remembering things, forgetting history came naturally to them.

The immediate effect of not knowing history or not giving it importance is the constant fear and uncertainty Malaysians have of the future. It is pretty elementary. Without the knowledge of history, they don't know where they came from and where they are headed.

Thus, it is not surprising that the most frequently asked question these days is: What will happen when Dr Mahathir retires?

They ask the question as if Dr Mahathir were the only prime minister the country has ever had. Yes, Dr Mahathir has been around for a very long time. The people in their twenties and thirties have not known any other prime minister other than him. But they are not the only people asking the question. In fact, it is asked more often by retired civil servants, top businessmen and even veteran politicians.

History may not provide us with all the answers, but if we were to allow ourselves to be guided by it, I think we will be less worried about Dr Mahathir's retirement and more confident of our future.

The very fact that we are still here today, and doing much, much better than most developing countries in the world, has a lot to do with our political system. It guarantees smooth and peaceful leadership transitions.

Prince and Prime Minister...

Granted that there will always be a Hajah Putih Md Arif, the winds of change will continue to blow, and leaders will continue to come and go.

Putih was my grandmother. Yes, this is me telling a grandmother story, literally. To her, there could never be anybody else apart from the anak raja - her deferential reference to the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Malaysia's first prime minister.

She told us she voted for the kapal layar (sail boat, the symbol of the Alliance, the predecessor of the Barisan Nasional (BN)) because it was led

by the anak raja (prince).

She feared that if Tunku were not around, the Japanese would come back to rule Malaysia. She suffered great hardship during the Japanese occupation of Malaya. But when she died of old age in 1984, Dr Mahathir was the prime minister.

Today, some people are worried about the transition because they lack knowledge in history and more so because they have the luxury of time to engage in such debates.

Elsewhere, prime ministers and presidents have come and gone in quick succession. Some were driven out of office by voters and protestors because they were corrupt or ineffective, while others were shown the door at gunpoint or were simply assassinated.

There have even been instances of countries not having suitable candidates for the prime ministership and presidency, or opponents refusing to recognise the election of a leader. Being used to living under one prime minister for so long, some people are reluctant to face a change. But not all our prime ministers have served such a long tenure. Tun Abdul Razak served for six years and Tun Hussein Onn, five. Only Tunku (13 years) and Dr Mahathir (22) have served an extended tenure.

We fear that the next prime minister will not be as good as the last one. The same thing happened when Dr Mahathir became prime minister in 1981. In fact, among those who fear that things will not be as good for Malaysia or, more appropriately, for them when he leaves are the people who had derided him when he became prime minister.

Those who remember history will have no difficulty recalling that many non-Malays, especially the Chinese, were worried that Dr Mahathir would discriminate against them.

They were influenced by allegations that he was an ultra and a Malay extremist simply for speaking up for poor Malays. In the 1969 general election, the Chinese voted against him when he sought re-election in the Kota Star Selatan Parliamentary seat in Kedah. The Chinese supported PAS and Dr Mahathir lost the seat.

He went on to write *The Malay Dilemma* and was booted out of Umno by Tunku. Tun Razak brought him back in 1972.

The same happened when the hugely charismatic and successful Tun Razak died of leukemia at the age of 54. Many people did not pin much hope on his successor Tun Hussein. But the Johor aristocrat, unfairly dubbed by some as an outsider and caretaker prime minister, pulled the country together and survived one of the biggest challenges ever faced by Umno.

When he took over, PAS was a component party of the BN, having been brought in by Tun Razak in 1974 in an effort to unite the country. But PAS subtly used its membership of the BN and the Government to undermine Umno and the coalition. Tun Hussein expelled the party from the BN at the end of 1976.

He went on to gain the respect and love of friends and foes for his gentlemanly demeanour. When he tearfully announced his resignation, the nation wept with him. They pleaded with him to stay on but he stood firm, saying that he had made up his mind both on his retirement and on Dr Mahathir succeeding him.

Nobody in his right frame of mind should expect Dr Mahathir's shoes to be filled size for size. This is certainly not the desire or the wish of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. In fact, there is no need for him to do so.

As history has shown, each of our previous prime ministers has led and ruled according to his ability, personality and the time that he sat on the high chair.

They had been able to do so because we have a well-established and

proven system of succession, administration and policymaking. Ours is not a presidential system where one man can rule like a dictator if he wants to.

We have also shown our capacity to change and adapt, even in the worst of situations. Back in 1969, in the aftermath of the May 13 race riots, not very many Malaysians were sure of the continued survival of the country. But we not only survived but also prospered despite the constant groans and moans about the New Economic Policy and other social engineering efforts.

Still, we have to bear in mind that what we have achieved so far could be undone if we allowed fear and uncertainty to cloud our judgement. Or if we allow suspicion to erode our sense of trust and fair play.

Abdullah is not Dr Mahathir. Neither is he Tunku, Tun Razak or Tun Hussein. But interestingly, Abdullah has not only been around for a long time - as a youth leader, civil servant and politician - but has also served under all the prime ministers.

DATUK FEVER

MY sympathies to a certain new Datuk for getting his bouquet late. The bouquet, which was intended to celebrate the conferment of the title by the Sultan of Perak recently, was misdirected.

For unexplained reasons, other than the fact that the sender is a friend of this writer, the bouquet ended up at my house. When I called him to inform him that his office had misdirected the bouquet, he had a good laugh and said I could keep it. He said he would ask his office to send a fresh one to the new Datuk.

I do not know who this new Datuk is but I think he deserves both the bouquet and the sympathy.

It is not the best of times to be receiving such an award, especially when a tad too many Datuks and, to a lesser degree, Tan Sris and Tuns, are in the news for uncomplimentary reasons - like having their titles withdrawn for bad behaviour, being charged in court for criminal breach of trust, having lovers' tiffs in public and seeking divorce. On average, though, the behaviour of these titled people is not as bad as it appears from press reports.

With so many people being made Datuks and Tan Sris, there is bound to be a few who, from time to time, end up on the wrong side of the law or behave in a manner that is unbecoming of their status. Furthermore, with the Sultans and Governors, on the recommendations of their Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers, giving away titles to very young people, mostly businessmen or children of businessmen, things are bound to go awry.

There are Datuks who are in their twenties and early thirties. At that age, you are just beginning to do all the wrong things in the process of maturing - you drive way above the speed limit, you party all night, you occasionally get a bit too tipsy albeit still insisting on driving, you quarrel with your girlfriends in public and you get involved in fist fights.

If that is bad, think again. There have been instances of royal titles being conferred on crooks and people with questionable backgrounds. No wonder the Press is having a field day maligning every imaginable Datuk and Tan Sri for the most mundane of scandals to the worst of crimes.

We can't blame them, not when some Datuks and Tan Sris (and their Datins and Puan Sris) think of their titles as glamorous rather than honorific. So, they behave like movie stars - living interchangeably in fantasy and reality, between acting and doing the real thing.

And to think that you thought Malaysia was dull. It is, though, when we insist on mentioning every other Datuk and Datin, Tan Sri and Puan Sri, and repeating his or her name each time a speaker takes to the rostrum. It

is boring and an unfair punishment for the audience.

#### IT'S ALL IN THE PLANNING

LOOKING at the haphazard development around the country, I wonder if there is still a government department called Town and Country Planning.

In the days when I was schooling, and later searching for jobs, Town and Country Planning was one of the most sought-after departments. It was not as sundry as the Custom or Immigration Department but was well known enough among young job-seekers.

If the department still exists, I wonder even more about its functions. Just look at where townships, housing projects, high-rise apartments and schools are sited.

Some are located only metres away from busy thoroughfares and clogged junctions. One example is the Riana Green and the Sunway Sutera condominiums and the Sekolah Kebangsaan (Cina) along Jalan Tropicana Utama in Damansara. They are hardly 50 metres apart from each other.

Don't be fooled by the name; Jalan Tropicana Utama is nothing more than a single-lane temporary lorong which used to serve only a few hundred households and a golf club. Then, almost overnight, came the condominiums, the Sunway Damansara housing estate, the school, the high-rise office buildings and more golf courses.

Everything else about this location has changed except this little lorong flanked by a school, several condominium blocks and a water tank. More high-density developments are taking shape nearby.

Such is our town and country planning. No wonder we have everything - from massive traffic jams to frayed tempers, road rage, air pollution and the loss of productivity.

Come to think of it, with every young person (or old person with the brain of a child) fixing huge noisy exhaust pipes to his or her car, and the heavy vehicles spewing black smoke, our noise and air pollution laws are nothing short of hogwash.