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Of faith and science

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MANY Malaysians, hampered by a conflict of belief systems, still lack an awareness and an appreciation of science and technology, claims an academic.

A review by the Malaysian Academy of Science of Malaysia's first National Science and Technology Policy reveals that "the general populace is ignorant of what science is about, being either disinterested in or suspicious of the work of scientists," says Dr Baharudin Yatim, professor of Applied Physics and director of Space Science Research Institute at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

Reiterating former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call to Muslims to eradicate their fear that science and technology would undermine their faith, he adds that "the ability to exploit science and technology is becoming strategically important and decisive for the economic performance of Malaysia".

Baharudin was speaking on Promoting Scientific and Technological Culture: A Study of Malaysia's Science and Technology Policy II and Action Plan, held recently in conjunction with The Fourth SEAF-Kaneka Public Forum 2003 in Putrajaya.

"Science and technology play a critical role in social, environmental and health care programmes, sustainable development, job creation and economic growth," he says.

Elevating science and technological awareness and appreciation provides the most conducive climate possible for invention, innovation and technological advancement.

"Ignorance of science and technological development can lead to unreasoning fear of the unknown, resistance to change, rejection of new ideas, even overt hostility towards technology," he says.

On the other hand, uncritical acceptance of technology can be equally damaging.

"Society will be unable to face in a rational manner the basic moral and ethical issues that can be raised by technology," he adds.

Baharudin says the development of a scientific and technological culture as indicated by the level of science and technology awareness and appreciation in the general population is less than satisfactory.

"Our calculated guess is the strategies implemented so far (under the first National Science and Technology Policy) do not reach deep and wide enough into our society.

"Having realised this, we should go back to the beginning and make corrections to our strategies, taking guidance from the Malay adage that if you are lost midway, go back to the beginning," he says.

The second science policy and action plan, which was launched in June this year, was the culmination of a study undertaken by the Malaysian Academy of Science of Malaysia's National Science and Technology Policy.

The most important conclusion of this study is that "we must involve the religious organisations in implementing the strategies for developing a scientific and technological culture", Baharudin says.

For Muslims, the Islamic Development Department (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) is obviously the appropriate agency to start with.

Through it, access can be extended to the various Islamic religious organisations down to the village level.

For others, the same role can be played by the Council of Churches, the

Hindu Sangam and a similar organisation for Buddhists.

Furthermore, practising scientists ought to be given an expanded role in the implementation of these strategies.

"Some of the activities in which these scientists can participate are in public lectures, taking on an advisory role and in various media mediums," says Baharudin.

The Southeast Asian Scholars & Public Intellectuals Fellowship (SEAF) is a short residential programme conducted at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (Ikmas), UKM.

Public intellectuals are selected as Fellows annually from Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia to pursue research and writing while participating in public dialogues.

This year's Fellowship was from Sept 1 to Oct 31. Ikmas is undertaking a research project on Malaysia's progress in developing scientific knowledge and technological capacity.

Directed towards the enabling environment locally, the theme for the SEAF Programme 2003 is Science and Technology for Holistic Development.

Established in 2000 and funded by Kaneka Corporation - and the Japan Foundation until 2003 - this fellowship programme offers selected social activists, scholars and journalists the opportunity to familiarise with each member country's political and intellectual cultures, resulting in membership links.