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The Cairo connection

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THE past few months have been busy for Universiti Malaya's Professor Mansor Md Isa. Ever since he was appointed the director of the newly-formed Department of Malaysian Studies at Cairo University, Egypt, he has been hither and thither, preparing for his departure.

For one, Mansor is liaising with UM's library regarding transportation of literature on Malaysia to Egypt.

"I have requested that pamphlets, journals, CD-ROMs and government publications from the library be shipped to Cairo. I hope to make the new department as complete as possible," says the professor of finance, who received his appointment letter in May.

For another, he is obliged to attend the numerous farewell gatherings planned by friends and colleagues, not to mention the endless phone calls he has to make before leaving for Cairo in the middle of this month.

If all this is tiring for Mansor, wait till the pace picks up once he is in Cairo. As the director of the Malaysian Studies Department in Cairo, Mansor, 52, is expected to take on multiple roles.

"I am the project and planning manager as well as the treasurer," he says, smiling.

Still, the former dean of the Faculty of Business and Accountancy is looking forward to his three-year stint.

He concedes that it is a big responsibility and "I carry with me the expectations of both the university and the Government".

The formation of the department is a long-standing dream of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who hopes it will be a platform for scholars, intellectuals, students and interested professionals in the Muslim world to exchange ideas on Islam and modernisation.

UM's International Institute of Public Policy and Management was given the task of realising the Prime Minister's wish.

Mooted some five years ago, the department aims to promote and present Malaysia as a model of a progressive and modern Islamic nation to the Egyptians and other Muslims from surrounding countries.

Indeed, the academic and professional communities in Egypt are keen to learn about the Malaysian development philosophy and formula for maintaining unity among the various ethnic groups here.

So, it is not surprising that the Department of Malaysian Studies is the first among foreign studies departments at Cairo University's Centre for Asian Studies to have a physical presence.

"The Egyptians are in awe of Malaysia's accomplishments. They have much respect for us - a small Muslim nation which is vocal in the international arena," says Mansor.

Formal relations between Malaysia and Egypt began 43 years ago with the opening of the Malaysian embassy in Cairo. Both countries share a long history in the fields of religion, education and trade.

Al-Azhar University, the world's oldest academic institution, played a major role in fostering early ties between Malaysia and Egypt.

"Many of our prominent religious scholars and political leaders were graduates of the university," says the Kedah-born Mansor.

The initiative is the first academic alliance between UM and Cairo.

The UM-Cairo "marriage" is well matched, says Mansor. "UM and Cairo University are contemporaries. Both are public universities whose origins can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century," he adds.

The Department of Malaysian Studies will also serve Malaysian students in Egypt and neighbouring countries.

A Press release from UM states that the department will provide students with "detailed and accurate information on Malaysia in the fields of history, economics and business, finance and banking, social and political systems, apart from conducting academic courses and training modules that will enhance their job prospects".

Apparently, local students pursuing their degrees in Islamic Studies in Egypt face difficulties finding employment upon returning home as they lack skills that are not directly related to their field of study.

"There are only limited job vacancies for religious teachers and scholars locally. Some background in management and finance will help these students broaden their career options," says Mansor.

Currently, there are about 6,000 Malaysian students in Egypt, of which 98 per cent are private students and only two per cent are scholarship holders. Most of the Malaysian students in Cairo are studying Islam and medicine.

Mansor hopes that the services offered at the new department will promote mobility of students and scholars particularly at postgraduate level.

"We notice that courses such as engineering, science and business management are popular among Middle Eastern students," says Mansor.

Facilitating and intensifying collaboration in research between the two universities is another crucial role of the Department of Malaysian Studies.

In conjunction with the official inauguration of the Department of Malaysian Studies in June, the first conference on Egyptian-Malaysian relations was held in Cairo.

Academic staff from the two universities presented eight papers which, among others, emphasised the comparative aspects and bilateral ties between Malaysia and Egypt.

Tan Sri Datuk Mohamed Khatib Abdul Hamid, chairman of UM's board of directors, in his keynote address, underscored education, religion and economics as the key topics to be studied.

He stressed the need to study differences in the practice of Islam by Muslim governments worldwide.

"A constructive approach would be to engage in serious and systematic efforts to probe the lack of material wealth among Muslims (at individual, organisational or societal level). This has never been satisfactorily explained," said Mohamed Khatib.

During his first trip to Cairo University for the official launch of the department in June, Mansor met his future colleagues and toured the campus.

The feedback he received from his Egyptian counterparts was positive.

"The academic staff are excited and supportive of this department," he says.

It is hard to predict how students at Cairo University will respond to the department. Mansor, however, is confident that it will be well received.