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The Great Malaysian Narrative

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NEWLY-founded nations often strive to shape their own Great National Narrative (GNN). The GNN is about the founding of a nation, the diverse origins of its peoples, nation-building and national imagination. It is also about its leaders.

Indeed, Malaysia now has numerous stories to tell as part of its own GNN. Stories about Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who retired this week, as part of the political dimension of the GNN are now unfolding. New stories about Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister, will be told in due course.

However, there are nations and societies which have long histories but do not have great tales to tell. Societies without a GNN remain uninspired and resistant to change, characterised by the rule of oppressive and extreme orthodoxy.

Power elites in these societies create their heirs and give rise to the next echelons of oppressors with self-serving ideologies and rehearsed fanaticism.

Leaders and their followers have the opportunity to unleash the potential and greatness of their people with astute management. However, when they are surrounded by self-serving circles of people, opportunities for great service may be lost.

That is why it is so important for leaders to get feedback from channels other than those manned by their immediate circles who may not share their vision of a GNN.

In Malaysia today, stories are being told about politicians, kings and religious leaders. Tragic stories are sometimes told of the poor, seen as sad victims of natural tragedies or circumstances.

Although some leaders may make a big show of helping the unfortunate when they are given publicity, truly just and compassionate leaders will care for the unfortunate everyday of the year, in sincere ways, without the need for publicity.

In multiracial Malaysia, telling the Great Malaysian Narrative (GMN) is no straightforward matter. This is because the insensitive selection of stories to be told may marginalise, ostracise and alienate large sectors of the populace.

Tracing the GMN to Srivijaya and Majapahit is not acceptable to many because of the Hindu connection and because it places Malaysian history within the historical polity and milieu of Indonesia.

Pushing the turning point of Malaysian history to 1,424 years ago with the beginning of Islam is acceptable to some but alienates those from other religious groups.

However, GMN which focuses on non-Muslims living in dignity in a just Malaysian society where their inalienable interests are protected, particularly the right to practise their faiths, seems to be contentious but argued to be potentially more popular and acceptable.

Relating the GMN from the beginning of Malacca as the Emporium of the East, equal to Venice, would evoke positive responses from the populace.

Of particular interest are the stories of the Chinese Muslim admiral Cheng Ho and of Indian traders who plied the sea routes and seaports bringing Islam to the region. When the Great Temple in Canton, China was burned, Malacca, because of its wealth, was able to generously contribute gold in boxes for the rebuilding of the temple.

Yet the narratives of local history and local heroes are hard to elevate to national and international level without distorting truth and reality. The time-proven optimistic narrative is about Independence, heroic deeds and significant achievements.

Independence is a good narrative point - not too far back for the imagination and not too near to be prejudiced towards personalities.

A favourite narrative is about multiracial, multireligious and multicultural understanding and of the uniqueness of a people from different origins celebrating cultural festivities together. The storytellers are careful to always note that such festivities are more about respect and togetherness than about joining in the religious merriment.

In contrast, the religious narrative does not allow for intimate involvement in the festivities of other faiths.

Given the recent change of political leadership in this country, there are strategic choices as to how the GMN will be told. Historical facts will remain but historical interpretations and reinterpretations are open-ended.

In the more recent past, and currently, the GMN was and is about democracy and the rights of every person to a vote. The GMN is also about the right to education, the opportunities for higher education and the creation of a knowledge-based society.

In the economic domain, the GMN is about the creation and expansion of wealth and its equitable distribution.

In the cultural domain, the GMN is about high ethics and moral values and the creation of a virtuous society.

In the legal domain it is about the supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law and it is about social justice for all, irrespective of race, religion and social status.

In the public service domain, the GMN is about good leadership and being the world leader in efficiency, professionalism and transparency.

The core narrative is about fostering a collective historical memory.

Historians have always encouraged leaders to draw lessons from the past. Those who study the future too have lessons for us to learn. Wise leaders will be advised not just by scholars and scribes of the past but also by those of the future.

Credible leaders will have to construct a new narrative which will not just capture the imagination of the people but also offer hope to all Malaysians for a secure and dignified future.

There is a need to continue fostering the GMN beyond 2020 and launch a new trajectory of imagination and ambition. The new narrative will foster a common destiny and future, either in a friendly international order or a competitive global environment.

It must be able to stimulate creativity and the passion for adventure and life and be visionary enough to allow for mistakes to be learnt and improvements made.

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