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The way forward lies in looking back

THAT Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a man with a vision of the future was made very clear many years ago when he unveiled the blueprint for making Malaysia a developed nation by the year 2020. At the same time, he is very much a man with a strong sense of the past. As a pragmatic visionary, his contemplation of what has gone by is not a nostalgic backward look in order to recreate a distant golden age, but a sober survey of what has happened in order to chart the way forward.

Speaking at the recent launch of a book on Datuk Onn Jaafar, the Prime Minister echoed the aphorism often attributed to the American philosopher George Santayana that "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it".

A nation that does not share a collective memory of where it has been, will not know where it is going. And a nation that does not know where it is going will end up going nowhere. In urging young Malaysians to defend the country against external threats, Dr Mahathir reminded them to learn from the history of the country's struggle for independence. By doing so, they "will understand the struggle, love the country more and help make Malaysia into a developed nation by 2020".

The importance of the study of history in creating national identity, developing good citizenship and promoting patriotism has long been recognised. History is a core subject in the national school curriculum. However, the manner in which it is taught leaves many students questioning the value of history in their lives in the manner of Henry Ford, the American carmaker, who not only dismissed history as "bunk" but as "one damn thing after another". In an exam-oriented system where teachers resort to teaching to the test, history is often reduced to a litany of random facts, meaningless dates and dead heroes and villains. Unless it is well-taught and succeeds in firing the imagination, history will fail to teach those vital lessons that the young need to learn. History is interesting and absorbing if taught by imaginative teachers.

Dr Mahathir has also expressed concern that not much has been written on the country's history by local historians. Indeed, although there has been much local scholarship in 19th-century Malaysian history, contemporary history has been neglected. The gaps in the narrative of Malaysia should not be left to foreign scholars like it was before Independence. In the colonial era, Malaysian history was a history of the British, by the British and for the British - history became "their story" rather than "our story". This Euro-centric view of history was successfully challenged by local scholars. Since a lot of the current studies on Malaysia are being conducted by researchers from outside the country, there is a need for Malaysian academics to assert their voices. As the Prime Minister pointed out: "We must write what has happened today for ourselves, the society and nation so that it will be recorded in history books."

However, local interpretations of Malaysian history should not be prejudiced and parochial. If the vision of the future is to be informed by an understanding of the past, Malaysian historians should scrupulously provide - without fear or favour - factual and logical explanations that lead to a better understanding of Malaysia. It is their responsibility to reconstruct the Malaysian past and make significant contributions to Malaysian historiography.