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True spirit of 'independence'

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CARCOSA Seri Negara, the nation's most historical colonial hotel, perched on a hilltop overlooking the Lake Gardens, is a place not many Malaysians can afford to stay in.

The closest a Malaysian of humble beginnings got to it was jogging into the compound and getting a whiff of its splendour.

Even then, he was stopped by the security personnel manning the entrance and told he was not allowed to run around the area.

With that, he returned to his previous routine, jogging on roads outside the Carcosa compound.

He said the few sessions he managed to jog into the Carcosa area was sufficient to get a feel of the place and the history behind it.

"More than anything, the fact that there was quite a controversy when the Government decided to demand its return from the British Government makes the place more poignant," he said.

His reflections on Carcosa and controversies over its return to the hands of the Malaysian Government tells numerous tales.

The present day Carcosa Seri Negara is the union of two mansions built during the colonial heydays.

It was in 1886 that Frank Swettenham, after being appointed Resident General of the new Federated Malay States, began construction of his official residence and named it Carcosa, which according to some literature, was Italian - CaraCosa, meaning "dear thing".

The other mansion is the King's House, later renamed Seri Negara, which was built to accommodate the Governor of the Straits Settlement and other important guests to the country.

In 1956, then Chief Minister of Malaya Tengku Abdul Rahman gave the deeds of Carcosa and its surrounding land to the British Government as a gift and a token of goodwill.

After independence, Carcosa became the residence of British High Commissioners to Malaysia.

However, in 1987, the Malaysian Government and Dr Mahathir "pressured" the British Government to return Carcosa, which the latter agreed to do so.

In 1989, Carcosa Seri Negara became a hotel.

To some Malaysians, the move by Dr Mahathir to regain Carcosa was not going to foster goodwill with Britain but to others, it was a symbolic act to relieve the nation from the last vestiges of colonialism.

After all, Carcosa and its surrounding is probably the most prime piece of land in the nation's capital and there was no reason why it should remain in the hands of the British Government when the deeds were given when the nation was not yet independent.

But Carcosa was just one of many shreds of colonialism that needed to be regained.

It was during Dr Mahathir's administration that the nation took over Guthrie Corp, one of the oldest British plantation companies in Malaysia, in what was described as a "dawn raid" on the London Stock Exchange.

The success of the "raid" led to the LSE to change its rules and that was the best Britain could do to retaliate.

While these moves under Dr Mahathir were viewed negatively by most Britons and even by some Malaysians, the rest of the citizenry was quite aware of what was being pursued.

Much as Malaysia, being a trading nation and dependent on foreign investment, it was not prepared to have its policies and governance be determined by external forces.

There have been other nations that tried to break away from the shackles of colonialism after independence including the likes of Zimbabwe.

Under President Robert Mugabe, its programmes to regain prime land from "white settlers" led to killings and much hostilities.

No doubt, it was the manner the process was conducted that led to the hostilities, apart from the credibility of the nation's leader being dragged into the debate.

However, the fact remains, while Malaysia successfully regained what rightly belonged to it from the former colonialists without tragic consequences, other nations have had a great price to pay, and in the case of Zimbabwe, sanctions from its former colonial masters and having Mugabe treated shabbily by the international community.

A more recent example of Dr Mahathir's firm stand regarding Malaysia's independence was his refusal to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) when the nation was hit, alongside other Asian nations, by the economic and currency crisis of 1997.

He decided, and took the risk, of trying to remedy Malaysia's economic crisis, with policies that did not subscribe to prescriptions of the IMF. Today, Malaysians take pride that the nation, on its own, managed to get its economy out of the woods.

Earlier this month, Thailand held a few celebrations to mark its success in freeing itself from IMF shackles when it managed to settle its US\$12 billion (RM45.6 billion) debt to the IMF.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra declared his country would not be a victim of the powers of foreign capital.

In short, what Dr Mahathir had done was to deprive independent Malaysia the opportunity to hold celebrations which it does not need. It is ironic that Malaysia, which had been under several colonial masters, has managed to fend off neo-colonialism while Thailand, which takes pride as being the only nation in Southeast Asia which had not been colonised, has become a victim of colonialism.

For that matter, if other nations in the region are to be taken into consideration, Malaysians should indeed take pride in its postindependence successes of keeping neo-colonialism at bay.

In retrospect, Malaysia had been blessed by wise leaders since independence. If Tengku Abdul Rahman ensured independence was gained without bloodshed, his successor Tun Abdul Razak Hussein ensured the nation grew and stopped being dependent on other nations, especially its former colonial master.

The bottomline is to deal with any form of colonialism; what is required is courage and pride and these are values which Dr Mahathir tried to inject into the citizenry.

Of course, at the same time, he had his detractors, both local and foreign, who viewed his concerns as mere political strategy to distract from the populace the Government's and his own failures.

Yet, if the problems faced by other nations are to be of consequence, it is obvious that his concerns were not misplaced.

The question now, since he is not planning to share his leadership with the nation anymore, will leaders after him be able to continue to ensure the independence he had guarded jealously, prevail?

He has left a legacy that becomes trendy during a certain time of the year.