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Nationhood idea under scrutiny

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PROFESSOR Zawiah Yahya of the School of Language Studies and Linguistics in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities is very excited.

You would be too if you were in her shoes. In December, an international conference titled Language and Nationhood: Confronting New Realities, for which she is the organising chairman, will see some distinguished personalities attending.

The stellar speakers will include the by-then-retired Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad; possibly Nelson Mandela, an icon who represents freedom and justice; and also, possibly, Hanan Ashrawi, the respected Palestinian activist.

(The latter two can only confirm their participation closer to the date, depending on issues of health and homeland political realities, respectively.)

"Our Prime Minister confirmed his participation in early June. It is not easy to get him (to give a talk) and he has agreed to give the keynote address. So, it is the issue that must interest him," says Zawiah.

As for Ashrawi, the organisers wrote to her and the Palestinian replied that she is seriously considering attending the conference, the political situation in Palestine permitting.

Highly proud in securing the Prime Minister's confirmed participation and the almost-positive word from Ashrawi, the chairman of the organising committee waxes lyrical when talking of the former South African President and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Mandela.

"We are very interested in getting Mandela to participate because of the history of apartheid in South Africa. Imagine a situation where the pain is so great and the rupture is so great and it is all going to be very difficult to heal - but Mandela has done it! He has taken his country into a reconciliatory phase.

"Part of this policy of reconcilliation is recognising that there are 13 official languages in South Africa. Now, people in South Africa are willing to feel like a united nation. This is amazing, considering the history of apartheid that they had to go through.

"People listen to him and there is less fighting and less demonstration.

"Mandela is a great man who has suffered so much and yet he does not harbour any anger! He has managed to sublimate any resentment he might have had for the sake of national unity," says Zawiah, a professor of post-colonial studies and critical theories.

In talking about the conference, however, Zawiah is cautious because she has to wear many different shoes: that of the academic, that of the organising chairman and that of a private citizen.

She makes this very clear because, as the conference's organising chairman, she must remain neutral on the topic or risk being seen as biased or prejudiced.

She insists that the conference is a platform for voicing various positions on the idea of nationhood.

"We hope to see different perspectives from different countries during the conference," she explains.

Collectively, Zawiah and members of the organising team of the conference, in a Press release, state that language plays a fundamental role in nation- building and in the construction of concepts of

nationhood.

Wearing the academic/intellectual hat, Zawiah sheds interesting light on the idea of nationhood.

"There are many interpretations of nationhood. The Europeans call the concept nationstate, where it means that a country's people have identified a shared common destiny, a common vision and a common language - a common everything.

"But there are critics to the idea of nationhood, like Benedict Anderson, an academic who says that it is all in the imagination because one never really knows what the next person is thinking about - whether the next person is sharing your vision, your destiny and your past or not! "It is all an assumption that you make in your mind, hence, Anderson calls it an imagined community," she says.

As a result of this, there is no one prescribed method of seeding the concept of nationhood.

In the Malaysian context, for example, she says, there are a few ways of going about the process.

First, there is the option of allowing evolution to work things out and develop at their own pace. Kinks get worked out via natural evolutionary processes.

But, she warns, this can be a painful and slow process.

"And, you will never know what the end result is going to be."

Another school of thought (usually from the Government - especially during election time, she says) believes nationhood should be an engineered process.

"If you do a bit of (social) engineering, you expedite the process of it (nationhood) happening in a way that you envision it to be.

"This gives you a measure of control. It can be done through many apparatus, usually through the Government's various machinery like the education system, mass media outlets and government policies," she says.

What is her own take of nationhood, then?

"If you are asking me as a private citizen and not as the chairman, I would like to see the social engineering to take onboard the concerns of the communities. I don't know what formula can be used; but at the basis of it must be facts and an understanding of the needs of all members of the Malaysian community," she offers.

"I don't think things can be just controlled by legislation - unless the people are ready to accept it. Otherwise, we are going to have ruptures, you know."

Having said that, Zawiah reverts to her academic-self and says that, in her classroom, she always tells students that they must acquire critical skills to identify the agenda behind any discourse - an advice useful to anyone following the conference in December.

"We must not fear the hegemony of linguistic imperialism: usage of English as promoted by the United States and not by England. We must understand it, we must strategise and we must see what they are up to through discourse."

In the Malaysian context then, where language is often synonymous with the idea of nationhood, and considering the various drives to create "true" Malaysians over the years, the conference promises to be a riveting