

Dr M displays Plato's cave syndrome
Malaysiakini.com
January 31, 2011

The posts at the weekend brought an envelope from a Singaporean friend that had clippings of newspaper columns on Dr Mahathir Mohamad's comments earlier this month on Singapore Malays.

Bernama, the national news agency, had a story based on the letters that had appeared in the Singapore daily, *Berita Harian (BH)*, whose readers responded to Mahathir's disparagement of the Singapore Malay as marginalised and repressed.

In the main, the letters took caustic issue with the former Malaysian prime minister, denouncing his views as condescending and outdated.

However, one respondent spoke of Mahathir in glowing terms, calling him an exceptional leader.

Singapore newspapers are not available for sale in Malaysia. Neither is ours in the island republic.

While the two countries do cooperate in the intelligence-gathering and law enforcement spheres, their newspaper reading publics are informed and edified separately.

'So near yet so far' would be an apt description of the print media gulf that separates the two neighbors whose peoples share blood and other ties with each other.

The value of reading the newspapers of neighboring countries – even if they are not terribly good ones - is that you can get a keener sense of the life lived in them than would be the case if you didn't enjoy that facility.

This is an advantage to policy formulators and opinion makers.

Every once in a while, when a thunderhead boils up on the Malaysia-Singapore front, it's hard to deny, while the controversy runs its often acrimonious course, the relevance of the proverbial analogy of Plato's cave.

Like residents of Plato's cave, the view of the antagonists in Malaysia-Singapore flare-ups is restricted to the shadows they see on the wall of a cave in which they are confined.

That, generally, was the conclusion of two columnists, both Singapore Malays, who wrote on Mahathir's views on their kin in the January 20th edition of the *Straits Times*, the country's leading English daily.

Both Salim Osman, a senior writer in *ST*, and Wan Hussin Zoohri, a former MP, derided Mahathir's views as uninformed by the facts on the ground and skewed by the former PM's interest in stoking the fears of Malaysian Malays that a change of government in their country would result in their eventual economic and political marginalization.

Salim opined that the reality in Malaysia was that while poverty has been drastically

reduced and that a significant Malay middle class has emerged as a result of affirmative action policies, inequalities have sharpened.

"There is growing dissatisfaction in the community that politically connected Malays have benefited disproportionately from affirmative action policies," wrote Salim.

"Many also resent the use of public funds to rescue wealthy Malay businessmen," he elaborated.

Former legislator Wan Hussin Zohri described Mahathir's views as "unfounded" and caught in a time warp.

Wan Hussin upbraided Mahathir for "looking at Singapore Malays through an outdated prism, seeing them as they were at the time of separation."

'Remarkable progress'

As testimony of the progress that Singapore Malays have made, Wan Hussin cited the opinion of a redoubtable witness, the late Abdul Samad Ismail, whom the columnist hailed as "highly respected Malaysian journalist and intellectual."

Singapore-born Samad, a Magsaysay laureate who died in Petaling Jaya in September 2008, had been to the island republic in the 1990s, to visit relatives and, in 1996, to attend a memorial gathering for Lim Chin Siong, a left wing compatriot of Samad's in the struggles of the 1950s to free both Singapore and Malaya from British colonial rule.

Wan Hussin said Samad, during those visits, had offered his view that Singapore Malays had made remarkable progress.

"He personally had witnessed this on his visits to see his relatives. They had climbed the social ladder and secured respectable social positions for themselves," said Wan Hussin in his column.

"For Dr Mahathir to assert that Singapore Malays have been left behind, marginalized and suppressed reflects his ignorance of the social transformation happening in Singapore," he asserted.

"One can detect a false sense of superiority in him every time he indulges in his bashing of Malay Singaporeans. He has to be reminded that the rise of the Malay Malaysians is due more to 'Malayocracy' rather than meritocracy," Wan Hussin concluded.