

Integration with integrity (Part 4)

Malaysiakini.com

May 17, 2007

KJ John

"In a globalized and increasingly competitive world, Malaysia cannot expect to modernize its economy without modernizing its society. In practical terms, this means choosing the universal values of freedom of conscience and freedom of inquiry over the narrow dictates of Islamic orthodoxy. In practical terms, this means choosing the universal values of freedom of conscience and freedom of inquiry over the narrow dictates of Islamic orthodoxy."

The above quote was taken from a YaleGlobal article written by Sadanand Dhume, a Bernard Schwartz fellow at the Asia Society in Washington, DC. My entire column will be a response to this YaleGlobal Online article.

Last Sunday was May 13, and in memory of this infamous date of 1969, a small team of less than 30 multiracial group of "Elder Malaysians" (most were above 44 years of age) dialogued this very issue of Malaysia's crossroads junction in time.

The core issue: the Malaysian Mindset. How can Malaysians transcend the Malay, Chinese, Tamil or Malayalee or Sikh or Ceylonese or Kadazan or Iban mindsets to achieve the Malaysian Mindset of Vision 2020? Unless we think Malaysian, act Malaysian, and do Malaysian things, we cannot be Malaysian.

Today we think, talk and often act very ethnically. What encouraged me about that group of almost 30 people was they were mostly Malaysians in mindset: we could all listen, articulate and argue for and from a perspective without getting emotional about the issues at hand; and some of these were even very explosive matters!

In short, that group of Malaysians were able "to choose universal values of freedom of conscience and those of inquiry over the narrow dictates of Islamic Orthodoxy," (or any other orthodoxy) to quote the writer. That gave me hope in the possibility and probability of Malaysian Society forming in the future; although we are now 50 years old.

Requires constitutional amendment

So, with the above backdrop I will try to answer the writer's question, "can we modernize the economy without modernizing the society? Herein, I agree with the writer, that this is the most critical and acute issue facing the modern world, for all nations; not just Muslim ones or merely Malaysia. And even more acutely so for a multicultural one like Malaysia; which is a secular one based on the foundational Federal Constitution; but which, now the leadership pretends to be an Islamic state, by rhetoric and pronouncements! We can truly only become an Islamic nation or country (by numeric majority), but never a political Islamic state without the amendment of the Federal Constitution.

The writer also correctly argues that "the nub of the problem lies in Malaysia's inconsistent approach to modernization." I cannot agree more. Let me give my experience with the Islamization agenda.

The Islamization program of the government started in the early 1980s. In fact, there was an Islamic Values in Administration Committee in Intan under the tutelage of Dr Mazlan Ahmad

(right), then Director of Intan, in about 1983. The now Vice-President of PAS, Dr Hassan Ali, then with the PTD Service, was the chairperson of the committee to look at how to incorporate "Islamic Universal Values" into the training related to the administration and development of the nation.

To Mazlan's credit, he had invited me, as a Christian and another Buddhist lady (a Chinese language teacher) to also sit and help with defining what those "universal Islamic values were." The director's specific instructions to me were, please make sure we only adopt Islamic values of a universal nature, and that you see acceptable from a Christian point of view. Such wisdom was what made Malaysia "moderate and modern at the same time."

But, since the incorporation of the former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim into Umno and the government, the Islamic Agenda took an even newer sense of urgency and momentum. It was precisely on the Islamic Agenda platform that Anwar got his credentials in Umno via Angatan Belia Islam Malaysia or Abim, the Islamic Movement of Young Malaysians. It was his external role and influence that Umno president Dr Mahathir Mohamad "bought into and brought Anwar into Umno," which led to his meteoric rise, and the rest is history. The influence of Anwar and his Islamization Agenda was real and significant. Today, we see and hear a different Anwar. Can or will the leopard ever change its spots?

By the time I had returned from the US after studying from 1987-1992, what became obvious to me was that the Islamic Agenda had reached undesirable levels. In the Ministry of Finance, with Anwar Ibrahim as minister, Islamic public prayer was uttered and broadcasted every morning. The British had taught us PTD Officers to have "morning prayers," but they never meant the literal one!

This did not however happen in Miti (Ministry of International Trade and Industry), as both the minister and the secretary-general were clear that Miti was run based on universal and international values of trade and commerce. Miti officers also had to use English in their correspondences, almost defying the government policy but Rafidah Aziz was never challenged. And if one did not know how to socialize in the evening, you would most probably be transferred out within 24 hours! Today, the Chief Secretary to the Government is also from Miti.

The Ministry of Finance on the other hand slowly but surely "turned green over time," often to the abuse of non-Muslims who were forced to tolerate a lot of "systematic racism."

Doubting the Malaysian model

For instance, canteens would be closed during the month of Ramadan on the assumption that non-Muslims also had to learn to fast! On the contrary, in many other government departments and much of the private sector, there are more liberal and moderate Muslim bosses who would argue, "fasting is a private and personal matter, and we do not need to make it a public issue!" Therefore the public space remained moderate and liberal of "narrow values." Within such courageous leadership, canteens remained open and served not only non-Muslims but especially Muslim women who could not fast for other legitimate reasons!

Therefore, though the canteen issue is only a symptomatic one, it is nevertheless part of a systematic form of racism that has crept into Malaysia unwittingly; when private personal values are systematically applied to discriminate others of a different race and belief system. Even the canteen operators are forced to "convert their business agenda during the fasting month and grow an alternative night market business and revenue stream for the month."

Might reins over all.

The writer then goes on to further argue, "But the rise of China, India and Vietnam, and the demands of a shift from low-cost manufacturing to more knowledge-intensive work, raise serious doubts about the viability of the Malaysian model. The country needs freedom of inquiry to unleash the creativity of its people."

I cannot but agree totally. Malaysia excelled in the past based on good and wise longer term planning. Without fail, the Economic Planning Unit of Malaysia, since the late 1950s formulated and formatted development based on the five-year planning cycle and 10-20 year planning cycles. I believe the first Malaya Plan was between 1955-1960. But such economic foresight in planning is no more today! How can it be? When change is the only constant, how does one undertake longer term planning? Such drastic and rapid change is often called discontinuous change. Within a framework of discontinuous change, the traditional planning models using input-output analysis without any moderation is quite irrelevant.

Recognizing the decadence of such a planning model, in the early 2000, the NITC Malaysia brought the foremost Scenario-Planning Expert from the Shell Group International to share and anticipate the "future scenario for Malaysia," and proposed three alternative "engagement models with reference to three plausible futures." Unfortunately, the proposal was badly rejected and "even more unfortunate was that it was the brightest people in the room who were the first 'shoot it down.' To me, the Closing of the Malay Mind (as juxtaposed to Alan Bloom's book called the Closing of the American Mind) to ideas and ideals was now made evident. The then prime minister simply watched and could not do anything because two of his smartest people in the room led the charge.

Malaysia is today the victim of "the absence of the good and predictive/plausible futures scenario." In fact, I may even venture to guess that the 9th Malaysian Plan was designed and developed without a good and predictive Macro-Model of the future! I will stand corrected when someone shows me that such a credible and reliable model in fact exists.

Within the older NITC, we had also alternatively created a Knowledge-Measures Advisory Panel (or K-Map) with the simple role of identifying and distinguishing (or disaggregating) the k-value creators of the Malaysian Economy. Within K-Map we included some of the best and brightest minds Malaysia had to offer; including an EPU representative and both private sector and NGO reps of think-tanks. But, again much of the work was not mainstreamed because the "planning assumptions and parameters of EPU remained unchanged over all these years."

Today, the same kind and quality of work is being done by one Malaysian Scholar and Econometrician at the Monash Campus in Malaysia but then again this work too and its results have yet to be tapped upon by the Economic Planning Unit.

The Closing of the Malay Mind again to new ideas and ideals, which challenge existing parameters and assumptions. Therefore, our planning for the 9th and 10th Malaysia Plans remains "blind to the real issues of cheaper but higher technology value-added outputs being argued by the writer for India, China and Vietnam."

Address the core issue

In fact, Dr Sulaiman Mahbob the current DG of the EPU knows this more than anyone else. He was in fact the chief consultant to the Miti's original Second Industrial Masterplan wherein the Manufacturing Plus Plus vision was evolved. I was his counterpart in Miti. But, rather

unfortunately, Miti and EPU have again not taken this argument to the next level of logical construction and extension. It is not about moving upstream and downstream the value chain which is critical; this is only the first set of value-adds, but rather the “moving the whole value chain up by one or two measures,” which is the foundation of the K-Measure Challenge.

The MSC was designed to address this very core issue of the second value chain curve, but like all things Malaysian, it too has fallen by the wayside as we execute poorly and lose patience and then look for “other bigger and better approaches which equally lacks good planning content and correct parameters.”

Therefore, like the writer, I will also argue that even the Iskandar region will lose in the battle for attracting investments; because we are not any more only cheap land-labour factors of production. We must offer factor driven productivity. We must become knowledge and IP creators and process owners to achieve what the IMP2 strategy has originally called “the information intensive knowledge-driven processes strategy.” Somehow, both Miti and EPU have not fully caught this vision.

Therefore, we will remain ‘also rans’ in this larger battle for Foreign Direct Investments, because we cannot compete with either China, India or Vietnam when it comes to costs! Even Singapore will only off-load for cheaper costs, but never for IP-based knowledge-sharing vide new technology companies, as was the original vision of the MSC.

The writer then continues with his thesis: “Meanwhile, the disregard for non-Malays – for the most part Buddhist and Christian Chinese and Hindu Indians, who together make up a third of the country’s 25 million people – expressed itself most clearly in the architecture of the new administrative capital Putrajaya. Gaudy domes and soaring minarets dominate the skyline, and an Isfahan-inspired bridge spans a massive artificial lake. Acknowledgment of other cultures is conspicuous by its absence.” How perceptively argued.

Putrajaya, to me, is the single and most prominent location which could have had an Islam Hadhari effect; but very sadly again the closed Malay Mind does not see the value of multiculturalism as the original value proposition of even the MSC. As a student of SH Nasr, the famous Islamic Philosopher and Scholar of Science and Religion would argue, Putrajaya, like the Islamic veil, “reveals Islam as much as it hides Islam’s friendly face.” If one wants to find multiculturalism in Putrajaya, one would be sadly disappointed. Although designed to be the modern capital of Malaysia; it does not accurately reflect the multiculturalism of Malaysia. In fact, slowly but surely it is evolving into and becoming an ordinary Malay kampung atmosphere, in terms of cleanliness, ambience and maintenance. It is still wonderful and first class infrastructure, but what does the Palace of Justice mean within Malaysia if the Hindu man mentioned in the YaleGlobal article cannot find justice in that very palace! Palace of Justice for whom?

The writer continues. “At the same time, rather than enable the Malays to compete effectively as equals, Malaysia has ended up creating a class of crony capitalists dependent on government largesse and a Malay population that sees special privileges as a birthright.” This entitlement mentality does not augur well for Malaysian competitiveness. We did not get here after 50 years doing no work or little work but only collecting the 10-30% for the connect and collect-type of work. We used to accuse the Chinese middlemen in the villages of this kind of behaviour. Today we are little or in no way different but the serious hard work is missing! Unless there is a fundamental and radical unwrapping and disarming of the Malay Mind evolved from “crony capitalism dependent on government largesse,” we are sure to see the downfall of the Malay race within two generations.

Dealing with modernity

Already, I see that most of the obese young people are more of the specific race of people and the largest clients in the "fast food joints are also rich young Malay people." Easy come easy goes! Something has to change, and Malaysia needs to review and better appreciate how it can deal with modernity and the challenge of keeping and maintaining traditional values. The Chinese in Malaysia and elsewhere have done this; except for the kiasu attitude of Singaporeans and Malaysians. The Indians (other than the Tamils from the plantation sector) seem to have done it. The Sikhs have done it very well all over the world.

Therefore, I am not sure if the the current model of extreme modernity and extreme conservatism which is externally imposed is going to solve the Malay problem. To quote the writer in the article, "the country needs freedom of inquiry to unleash the creativity of its people. This means choosing the universal values of freedom of conscience and freedom of inquiry over the narrow dictates of Islamic orthodoxy." I cannot agree more.

In conclusion, again to choose the words of the writer: "The government has invested heavily in technology infrastructure in the form of the Multimedia Super Corridor, ambitiously hailed as the Silicon Valley of the East. But amid white-hot competition for scientific talent and despite relaxing some of the usual race laws, Malaysia finds it hard to attract and retain Indian and Chinese engineers.

Meanwhile, many of the country's brightest students – especially non-Malays – migrate to Australia, the US and Singapore, where everyone enjoys freedom of conscience and equality before the law." This is the categorical truth about the younger generation of Malaysians, of not just Non-Malays but equally so with young and very bright Malays also. They have a sense of dignity of life and equity of opportunities in life. Many of them find Malaysia discriminatory and tolerant of mediocrity to the exclusion of excellence and merit. So, whether it is my own children or those of good friends, many of them are planning to seek the global opportunity in the global cities of the world, where their multicultural talent and skills are truly and fully appreciated.

Therefore, moderate and liberal Malaysians need to take stock, sit up and take note. It would be very strange if a foreigner and an observer of Malaysia can write with such accuracy about issues and problems in Malaysia and it is only the leadership of Malaysia who have their heads in the sand.

God Bless Malaysia.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/67343>