

Iban fears on Malaysia still haunts ex-Sarawak DCM
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FORMER Sarawak Deputy Chief Minister James Wong Kim Min, 88, is still haunted by the fears that the Ibans expressed in 1962/63 over the formation of Malaysia. They had their suspicions of the Malaysians and worried that Britain, the departing colonial power, would let them down.

The veteran politician first realised this when the legendary Iban Temenggong (paramount chief) Jugah repeated more than once in his native language: "Anang Malaysia sebaka tebu, manis di pohon, tawal di hujung."

(Malaysia should not be like the sugar cane, sweet at the head and getting less and less sweet towards the end.)

"His misgivings were shared by many of the other Sarawak leaders as well," said Wong in a paper to 500-odd participants at a closed door forum, "Formation of Malaysia, a Promise Re-visited and the Way Forward", in Kota Kinabalu over the weekend. The forum was a curtain-raiser to the first official celebration of Malaysia Day on Sept 16.

Wong's paper, "The Equal Partnership and the Merger Concept of the Federation of Malaysia", was read by Sarawak's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) chief Baru Bian to an appreciative audience. The former was under strict doctor's orders not to travel.

The forum was organised by the Borneo Heritage Foundation (BHF) in association with the Common Interest Group Malaysia (CigMA), an ad hoc apolitical movement dedicated to "reversing the recolonisation of Sabah and Sarawak and disenfranchisement of the people".

Now, nearly 47 years after the formation of Malaysia, Wong still can't get Jugah's prophetic words out of his head. It's like an old musical theme that keeps playing over and over again in his head.

Wong himself has bitter-sweet memories. He was accused of plotting Limbang's secession from Malaysia. He was incarcerated in 1974 under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA). He was only released after his Sarawak National Party (Snap) agreed, albeit reluctantly, to join the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN). This was not at all the Malaysia that Wong had expected.

However, there had also been moments of regret earlier for Wong, brought about after Sabah shot down a Sarawak proposal that they federate together with Brunei. This was in the late 1950s as the people of Sarawak quietly explored the various avenues whereby they could be independent. There were dialogues unofficially on the proposal between Sabah and Sarawak for a federation in Borneo.

The Sabahans were not keen, continued Wong, since Sarawak was wrestling with an armed insurrection fomented by the outlawed communist movement. The Sabahans told their counterparts in Sarawak frankly that they did not wish to get involved in helping tackle the insurrection since they did not have similar problems.

Also, Sarawak was not a rich state in the late 1950s and seemed to have low economic potential.

"Our 47th year of independence within Malaysia would be an occasion to remind ourselves as to why and how Malaysia came about," said Wong. "It is also appropriate for us to remember the saying that when one drinks the water from a stream, one must not forget the source from which the water flows."

This is particularly true of the younger generation, urged Wong, especially those in their mid-fifties and below, who were then too young when Malaysia was formed to grasp and understand the implications.

"But what all Malaysians here must know and understand is that we (Sarawak) did not enter Malaysia, we formed Malaysia together with Sabah, Singapore and Malaya," Baru read from Wong's paper to thunderous applause from the audience.

Giving personal glimpses into the formation of Malaysia, Wong recalled that he was in London in 1960 on a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) meeting, representing Sarawak, when he was invited to the British Foreign Office for a meeting. Here, they wanted to know his views on the possible formation of a federation of Malaya, Singapore and the British territories in Borneo. He was taken aback but remembers being non-committal.

"In 1961, I was handed a telegram from Donald Stephens at Kuala Baram inviting me to Jesselton (Kota Kinabalu) for a meeting with Tunku Abdul Rahman to discuss his offer of a federation," said Wong. "It was called the Malaysia Solidarity Consultative Committee (MSCC) meeting."

Briefly, three more meetings of the MSCC followed in Kuching, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur and endorsed the idea of Malaysia. The Inter-Governmental Committee (IGC) was then formed to discuss and draft the terms and conditions of the Malaysian Constitution. It was based on the Malayan Constitution but with additional safeguards for Sarawak (and Sabah).

"Sarawak negotiators were adamant that the special autonomy reserved for Sarawak must be entrenched in the Agreement (Malaysia) as well as the Constitution," said Wong. "Otherwise, the idea of Malaysia would be a non-starter."

Even so, the job of selling Malaysia in Sarawak was a tough one. There was skepticism and doubts of sincerity over the state's long-term position in the new federation.

The rest is even more history.

But what is significant about Wong's paper is that he fails to mention the UN referendum in 1963 which found that only a third of the people in Sabah and Sarawak respectively accepted the idea of Malaysia. The rest, in both states, were equally divided between those who opposed the new federation and those who wanted independence first.

"I have often been asked, even today, by people particularly the younger generation whether I had any reservations or regrets on forming Malaysia," confessed Wong. "I am being asked whether I would have acted differently if given the choice again."

That would be the verdict of history on Wong and men of his generation. Personally, he feels that it was really a Hobson's choice for Sarawak in 1963.

The fact that the younger generation is asking Wong questions today is more than telling.

Deep in the kampungs in any part of Sabah and Sarawak, the perennial question among the

younger generation is why their states took that fateful decision to help bring about the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

That will be the question asked again this Sept 16 as the nation celebrates Malaysia Day officially for the first time in 47 years, no doubt thanks to Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak who is flogging his 1Malaysia theme.

Four other speakers contributed their papers as well. These also went over familiar territory and history as in Wong's paper.

Briefly, Sabah opposition strongman Jeffrey Gopari Kitingan spoke on the genesis of Malaysia and the way forward.

Sabah Umno veteran Karim Ghani, a translator for the Cobbold Commission, spoke on whether Malaysia was 13 states or one federation with three components and expressed disappointment with his party.

He insisted that Malaysia was one federation and three components. He feels that this could be easily resolved by the respective state assemblies in Sabah and Sarawak.

Sabah Law Association (SLA) representative Sukumar Vanugopal gave a detailed and high technical explanation on the numerous breaches of the 20 Points in the Federal Constitution.

He attributed the breaches to both Sabah and Sarawak being under-represented in the Malaysian Parliament, a point also raised by Jeffrey.

He also warned that the Federal Constitution was being tampered with because of the rejection of the basic structure doctrine by the courts. The Federal Constitution has been amended over 600 times within 50 years compared with the US Constitution which has seen only 27 amendments in the last 200 years, chipped in lawyer Nilakrisna James from the floor.

Former State Secretary Simon Sipaun gave his personal views and observations on the formation of Malaysia which he witnessed as a young man of 25 years. Sipaun, along with former federal deputy minister Kalakau Untol, also moderated questions and brief presentations from the floor and summed up the speakers in his closing remarks.

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