



BACK WHERE HE STARTED

Challenges await Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim at new ministry.

By Habhajan Singh

DATUK Seri Dr Rais Yatim, a strong-willed and seasoned politician, is these days preoccupied with issues relating to the nation's culture, arts and heritage. Those are the ambits of a new ministry created some two years ago and entrusted to him.

For a country with a rich mix of culture, surely his job would have been an easy task. Well, to his surprise, he found the existing support structure for the promotion of culture, arts and heritage pretty shallow, almost hollow.

Putting his legal expertise to good use, he began by drafting new laws to ensure the preservation of heritage.

The 65-year-old politician, who hails from the town of Jelebu in Negeri Sembilan, is grappling with the issue of looking for the fine balance in what constitutes the Malaysian culture. This is no simple issue as tempers flare and emotions can be whipped up when discussing issues pertaining to culture, language and other matters related to these.

'I must say it has been a difficult task. This tendency (to be Malay-centric), I'm not unabashed to admit, is happening,' he tells *Malaysian Business* when asked about the seemingly Malay-centric touch to national events and programmes in the past.

Rais began his political career as the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports in 1974.

Malaysian Business caught up with him recently. Excerpt

How does it feel to be helming the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage?

Coming here (to the ministry) is like coming back home. I did this job way back in 1974 (as Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports), with Pak Lah (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) then as the ministry's Director of Youth. The ministry then was under the ambit of other mammas and papas – sports and tourism and what have you. Now, it's all under Culture, Arts and Heritage.

What have you done at the new ministry so far?

I've been here slightly more than two years. During this period, I've been blessed to have a good set of colleagues in the form of officials who work with us under 10 departments. Before coming here, I was engrossed with law and the development of law. Coming here, first, it means I'm reliving part of my previous life in the early 70s, with the present PM who was then director of youth.

To fill in the demands of the ministry, much to the surprise of many, seems to be a hollow

thing after all. This ministry is new in the sense that for the first time, a ministry of culture has been created. Therefore, the first limb of duty would be to lend credence to culture. We are forging ahead to have a presence on the global level and domestically. We have to identify with our creation and heritage, music, our own theatre, and our own way of life. I looked around, we did not have much infrastructure other than the relevant theatres.

But I do notice this ministry needs to gallop along the line of value creation and identify and nurture what Malaysian culture is all about.

After looking at the spectrum, we noticed that Malaysia, as a country, is successful, as a developing nation it is very noted. But Malaysia with its own identity through windows of culture, arts and heritage is something else that we have to work out.

We have been running very fast in terms of economy, commerce and trade. We're No 17 in the world. But you can't say the same in terms of culture, arts and heritage. Some of our neighbours have done better in terms of these subjects.

What were the initial steps taken at the new ministry?

We began by creating two laws.

Under the National Heritage Act 2005, we believe that we ought to understand

what heritage is all about. How much of culture and arts becomes heritage, how much becomes tourism for us to sell? These issues have never been thought about.

We crafted the Act in such a way that we divided it into two parts: the tangible and the intangible. We compartmentalised monuments, dramas, music, language. We put them under various categories. Under the intangible, you must have the three processes: identification, promotion as well as preservation. These three practices are in every ambit of culture, arts and heritage.

Therefore, if you see Merdeka Stadium, it comes under heritage. We have created the first schedule of the Akta Warisan under which we could register all national heritages.

What's the significance of this move?

For the purpose of knowing what belongs

We believe we have created awareness amongst Malaysians, though not complete or as much as one would like. I admit it is not enough.

In the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP), we have something like RM700 million to work with in respect of all projects and programmes, including the administration necessities. Within this ambit, we're creating a ministry, creating projects for the nation. Art, through various channels, is to be developed. Most importantly, we must give a share of culture, arts and heritage matters to the various communities in Malaysia. It should not be, in our view, ethno-centric.

The main emphasis of the National Culture Policy of 1971 remains intact. What we lack is non-Malay cultural reconstruction as well as programmes. Somehow, through the ages, this has been lagging behind. We realise this. Therefore,

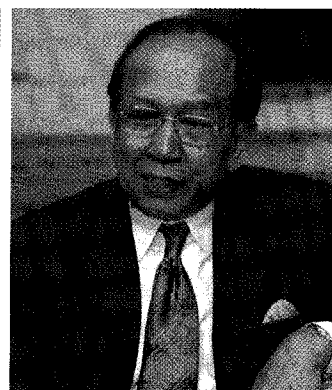
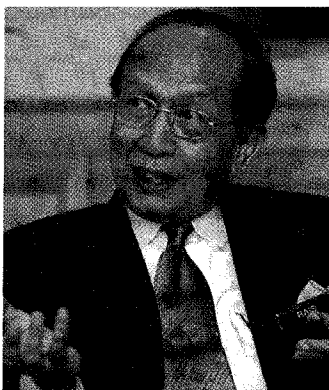
having the KL Festival of Arts. Again, I emphasised (to ministry officials), do not be ethno-centric.

What are some of your challenges here?

To change values in society is no easy task. The *Budi Bahasa* campaign is an uphill task. I have to harp on the same thing again and again.

In your book, *Jelebak-Jelebu: Coret-Coret Anak Kampung*, you noted that back in the 1970s, the Malay community was free and unhindered by petty prejudices. You also wrote that in 1982, Malay women clad in the tudung were few and far between unlike today. How are you handling such issues as the minister administering culture, arts and heritage?

I have been in the system for 30 years. It is not so much religious, as compared



Rais: This tendency (to be Malay-centric), I'm not unabashed to admit, is happening

to us, what needs to be preserved for posterity. We have the mechanism of administering it. For example, someone exporting heritage items without permission could be fined up to RM50,000 or jailed for five years.

A citizen also has the right to petition/complain to the ministry to gazette something.

Having laws is one thing, implementation is quite another. How does your ministry plan to go about with the implementation of the new Act?

Being a new ministry, the challenges are big and the responsibilities heavy. To start with, we need an advisory body pertaining to heritage. The National Heritage Council will be set up to advise the minister.

we would like the projection of other Malaysian communities to gallop along.

When you talk of Malaysian culture and heritage, in officialdom, it seems pretty Malay-centric. Do you expect any resistance to this tweak in emphasis?

I must say it has been a difficult task. This tendency (to be Malay-centric), I'm not unabashed to admit, is happening.

At every meeting, I emphasise to ministry officials not to be ethno-centric. The nation is built on the support base of various cultures, various practices. We must not forget that. We must translate it along realistic terms. That would mean we would have to include performances of not only Malays, but also of the other Malaysian communities. We are now

to the in-thing augmented by so-called religious tenets. Once a religious teacher or a personality connected to religion says something, no one will dare say something to the contrary. That began in the early 80s. Slowly but surely, social ethics have changed. It has never been debated.

It is very difficult. Much of the Malay culture has died because of these prejudice-prone statements from time to time. The *wayang kulit* died because of prejudice. No one wants to argue with what contravenes Islam and what is allowable. When a so-called *ulama* says something, that's it. It's the gospel truth. No one uses *ijtihak* or debates the matter. They fear being ostracised by society. **mb**