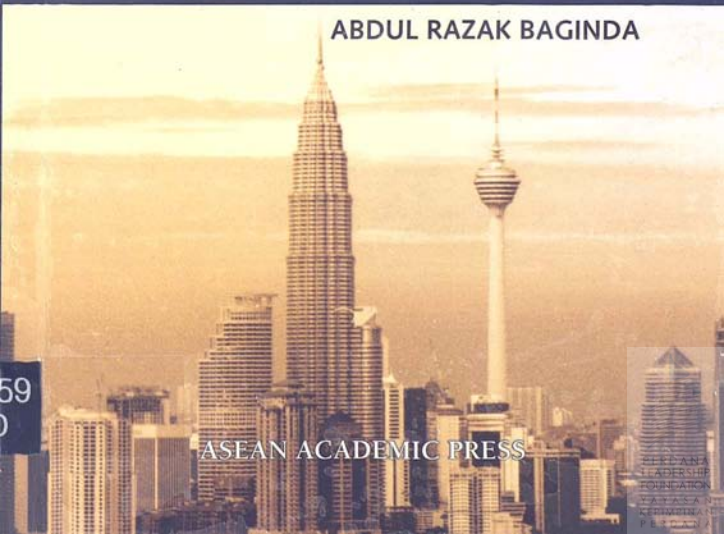




MALAYSIA IN TRANSITION

Politics and Society

ABDUL RAZAK BAGINDA



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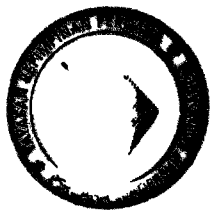
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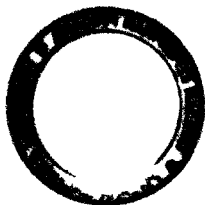
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For my daughter Rowena and her generation

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INTRODUCTION

MALAYSIA is in a state of transition today. Since independence, Malaysia has experienced impressive economic growth that it is now classified as an advanced developing country. However, it is equally clear that it has not reached the status of a developed country. Therefore, it is apt to describe Malaysia as transiting from one stage to another. This process will have no fixed time frame, even though the nation's vision talks of achieving this by the year 2020. This is so because much will depend on the definition of a developed nation, which must surely go beyond mere statistics. While it may be easier to talk of being an advanced economic nation, the society is less clear as this is dependent on the mentality of the people.

Whatever the argument, Malaysia is definitely on the right track. Nonetheless, the challenges facing the leadership, the corporate sector, and the peoples of the country are enormous. Some of these challenges are identified and discussed in this book. There are a number of recent developments that require additional comments, in particular, the issue of Dr Mahathir's announcement to retire in October 2003. In the international arena, while much have remained the same, an assessment of developments a year after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the US seems warranted.

Malaysian Leadership in Transition

Several significant developments of late need analysis, for they have profound implications on the country and the

region. The most significant and dramatic is perhaps the announcement by Dr Mahathir of his desire to step down. I have often argued that the ultimate assessment of a leader is not how he had obtained power, but rather the manner of his exit or departure from the helm. Through history we have seen leaders who have fallen from grace forcefully or even being rejected by the very people who once voted him or her. Suharto left his presidential seat in shame and despite what he had achieved ever since holding power in 1966, his legacy will very much be judged by his unceremonious downfall. History is a catalogue of leaders who have risen and fallen in all sorts of fashion.

In democratic systems, leaders have also been rejected for a variety of reasons. Arguably the greatest British prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill lost power in the elections of 1945, having successfully brought the country out of its darkest years and into its finest hour. Labour's 1945 election slogan was, 'Cheer Churchill, Vote Labour'. More recently, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl was voted out, due very much, as was reported, to the electorates believing that he had stayed for too long, rather than any blatant mistakes that he had done.

Globally, there are more leaders who had to vacate in shame than in triumph. Dr Mahathir's decision will indeed place him squarely in the latter's category. While there will be political pundits who will postulate the reasons behind his decision, I am of the opinion that he is most prudent and responsible. History will definitely judge him well, not only of what he has achieved for this country, but of his benevolence. Naming his successor as Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and identifying Mohd Najib Abdul Razak as the future deputy premier will allow a smooth transition.

Most observers of the Malaysian political scene are aware of the so-called "RAHMAN" theory. This stems from

an uncanny list of prime ministers, past and future, coming from the name of the country's first premier. From Rahman, Abdul Razak, Hussein, Mahathir, Abdullah and possibly Najib would complete this set. Call it what you want, but when Dr Mahathir announced his retirement during the Umno General Assembly on June 22 and subsequently named his successor and later hinted at his successor's successor, this theory appears to many as fortuitous.

While many have periodically speculated on the timing and manner of Dr Mahathir's departure from the helm of Malaysian politics, no one could have imagined that the country's fourth and longest serving prime minister would actually exit in the most dramatic fashion. As it turned out, the phased retirement appears to be the most foresighted on the part of the party leadership. There will always be people who would argue that some 15 months is a long time indeed in the political calendar. In retrospect, this period is thought to be ample to cushion and prepare the eventual withdrawal.

Not surprisingly, there was much speculation as to why Dr Mahathir decided to leave when he did. Some even asked him as to whether there was something that he was unhappy with. All things considered, he just called it quits because he wanted to retire at the top, and due very much to his own effort, he not only brought the country from the brink of an economic collapse, but also placed the country on the world map. In other words, he is 'on top of the world' today and it is always best to retire when one is at one's peak. Dr Mahathir will no doubt join an exclusive group of world leaders who have exited from politics at the right time, to be able to enjoy one's legacy.

Many leaders tended to overstay, resulting in a dip in their popularity. From a cursory examination of world leaders, many would like to stay on as long as one could possibly do. That is why in some political systems, they limit

the tenure office, thereby limiting the capacity of that particular leader. While there is an upside to this, in such a system, it also has its downside. You may want to retain a good leader beyond that provided term, especially when there is uncertainty on the future leadership. In the Philippines, for instance, by constitution, they have fixed the tenure of the presidency to only one term of six years. In other words, no matter how good a president is, he or she will have to give up the position after the term expires. Fidel Ramos was seen as someone who was able to command the respect of many, but unfortunately had to give up and a fresh presidential election was held. Movie actor Joseph Estrada got in only to be booted out by his vice-president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. There are also many other examples, even occurring in developed nations. Margaret Thatcher was ousted as the leader of the Conservative Party having held the position for three terms. Therefore, Dr Mahathir's announcement illustrates his altruism in his actions. No doubt his premium as a leader and a statesman has increased many fold.

Dr Mahathir is a living testimony of the dynamic democratic tradition that Malaysia has and this is the best that can happen to a young nation. For this, Dr Mahathir will certainly have a special place in the political annals of Malaysia. His farsightedness has been confirmed and nothing can change this.

What then is the future of Malaysia without Dr Mahathir's stewardship? I believe it will be much the same as his successor, as Abdullah and even Najib, are both products of the system and have been in government for several decades now. Abdullah has vast experience in government and has the image of being straightforward and simple, yet sophisticated when the need arises, will indeed bring about a new atmosphere to the country. It is

interesting to observe Abdullah's political career, for he has had a rich experience in both government and politics. Having worked as a civil servant, and serving Tun Razak at the National Operations Council (NOC), formed immediately following the racial riots of May 1969, he ventured into the political arena. Reaching the portfolio as the Minister of Education, often seen as a prerequisite for higher office, he chose to be part of a failed challenge to the leadership. His wilderness years were testing times for him and his dedication and loyalty to Umno was never in question, as he remained a member. It has been said that most leaders need to spend some time in the wilderness as this is part of the test of one's tenacity as leader. In this respect, Abdullah has had his share and his experience proves that he is worth his weight in gold. After all, man like Churchill and Dr Mahathir all had their fair share of trials and tribulations.

Abdullah's popularity in the party was proven when he was elected as one of the three vice-presidents, making him eligible for deputy premiership. The rest, as they say, is history.

Najib was actually catapulted into politics when he was persuaded by the people to stand for the by-election in the constituency of Pekan, upon the demise of his father. A graduate of economics from the University of Nottingham, he entered the political arena at a young age, and with his election, entered government. Having held a number of deputy minister's posts, including finance, he became the Chief Minister of Pahang and in 1990 became a cabinet minister as Minister of Youth, Culture and Sports. At the same time, he was elected the head of Umno Youth. He then became Minister of Defence and thereafter, held the Education ministerial portfolio.

Najib was to face his own version of his wilderness years when he first lost out to Abdullah as deputy prime minister. In the 1999 General Elections, his majority was substantially reduced and in the subsequent cabinet reshuffle, he was given the Defence portfolio, a position he has held previously. Like Abdullah, he continued to work hard and remained loyal to the Party and to the leadership of Dr Mahathir. He bounced back when he retained his top vice-president position in the 2000 Party Elections. Between Abdullah and Najib, they have vast experience and this will no doubt generate confidence among the populace.

While it will be sad to see Dr Mahathir leave, the idea behind it is noble. Today, we are resigned to the fact that we will soon enter a new chapter in the Malaysian saga. We must expect a new round of politics, as this is expected for new personalities will bring new style. However, it is the hope of all Malaysians that there will be greater unity among the top leadership of Umno, as well as others in the Barisan Nasional coalition. At the end of the day, we must not only bring greater unity, but also greater economic wealth to all Malaysians. We must try to live by the principle that winners should not win all, while losers should not lose all. By this, we should be able to satisfy all parties and get on with the job of making this country a great nation.

A Year after September 11, 2001

While the world commemorates the first anniversary of the horrendous attacks on the US, the clouds of war loom large over Iraq. In many respects, the world we live in today is no different from the ones our ancestors roamed centuries ago. As such the world has not changed since that fateful day on September 11, 2001, as conflict, destruction and

revenge are alive and kicking. The victims of the violence of that day have sought violence elsewhere and appear not to be satisfied until the illusive and nebulous concept of victory is achieved. Clearly, man will never learn the lessons of history and are perhaps doomed to live in infamy until Armageddon.

Immediately following the assault on both New York and Washington, D.C., there is a sense of worldwide grief and condemnation, expressed by all religions, races and creeds. The sympathy and support were genuine. However, this was no ordinary conflict, with no clearly identified enemies and territories. In the endless history of conflict, antagonists, with time and space, have been clearly identified. Even when guerrilla warfares were waged, from the Peninsula campaign, when Napoleon's *grande armée* was looking for Spanish guerrillas, to the American GIs' 'grunts' and the South Vietnamese soldiers conducting search and destroy missions against the Vietcong, the 'enemy' was clear, despite the often ambiguous line between civilians and guerrillas, which Mao referred to as the fish in the water. Right from the beginning, the US had a fundamental problem in dealing with the so-called enemy.

It must be remembered that the September 11 attacks came at a time when the notion of an enemy was fuzzy. Since the end of World War II, communism, embodied by the Soviet Union, was public enemy *numero uno*. This frenzy manifested in a global crusade, supporting regimes of whatever form that were fighting against this Marxist menace. Even domestic US was not spared, with the dark years of McCarthyism. This ground was brought to an abrupt halt when the Soviet Union imploded, signalling the demise of the empire that Stalin built. While some Americans and observers would claim credit, history will

probably attribute this to default, that of the contradictions of the Soviet system that was clearly unsustainable.

Over the last one decade since the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism, the US has not only been identified as the world's preponderant power, but was left with no enemy to fight. There were various attempts by several quarters, often played up by the media, to identify and create new foes; they have not been able to be cogent. In the midst of this quest, an enemy dropped from the sky and into the laps of the hawks in Washington. Overnight, an enemy appeared. However, there was a major problem: the enemy now is not so visible, and clearly not identified, and this makes it difficult to galvanise the support of Americans and of the world. This led to the emergence of Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaeda and the Talibans. The rest is history. What exactly has been achieved since September 11, 2001?

Nothing much, the world is no safer today than before. The fact that the Americans were taking enormous measures to safeguard the US and their interests globally, especially following the anniversary of the attacks, including closing their missions overseas, illustrate that the US remains vulnerable. Yes, the Talibans have been ousted and the al-Qaeda networks have been partially destroyed. But what about Osama? Days following President George W. Bush's emotional speech publicly identifying Osama as the new foe, many observers, notably defence and security experts, were pointing out the difficulty of looking for just one man, the so-called enemy and his nebulous global network. One year hence, Bush has admitted the uncertainty of the fate of Osama. Much to the chagrin of many globally, somewhere along the line, Washington switched enemy, pointing to Iraq. Anyone will tell you that it is easier to identify Iraq the foe than Osama, as the former

is a country, with a clearly identified military force, and of course, a leader, the infamous Saddam Hussein.

Cynics would argue that this shift was made primarily to keep the American spirit alive and, of course, Bush's popularity. The first anniversary of September 11 was approaching and people would begin to evaluate their achievements in hunting down the enemy. The report card was not going to be good. To carry the fight to Iraq was one way to continue this winning streak for Bush. Clearly, Bush's popularity is based on his aggressive stance. Before September 11, 2001, with the spy-plane incident over Hainan island, the president's popularity was waning. Today, the Americans are going ahead with or without the support of their allies and the United Nations.

At the outset, a wrong assumption was made by the powers that be in Washington, D.C. that somehow the wider enemy was Muslims and Islam. While this has been denied time and again, the actions and deeds do not match the words. Muslims have continued to be harassed and associated with terrorism. Irresponsible politicians, including the Italian prime minister, have started to compare broader issues that divide Islam and Christianity and the Western world. Words such as 'crusade' have been used, rekindling the notion of a clash, which may not necessarily be of civilisations but of belief and of value systems. There have been no real attempts to examine the much more deep-rooted reasons for the attacks on New York and Washington. What we have seen so far, instead, is that of revenge.

Instead of winning the hearts and minds of Muslims and those that loathe the US, the Americans have continued to attack them. The threat and in fact the actual employment of force by the US against Iraq points to this disastrous path. A golden opportunity is lost to isolate the extremists and to

fight them from within the Muslim community worldwide. The fact remains that the extremists form only a tiny minority of the Muslim world. However, the very actions of the US have played into the hands of this group, thereby gaining the sympathy of the masses. This actually poses a major dilemma for national governments that have large Muslim populations. Of course, the quagmire in Palestine and the apparent American inertia to play an impartial role, thereby giving a free hand to the Israelis, has made things worse. Somehow, in the eyes of Muslims globally, there appears to be a conspiracy by the US to subjugate them. While this may be a false perception, this has to be addressed.

The US today is standing alone, with the exception of Tony Blair. (It is Blair and not the United Kingdom, as London's strong support for Washington stems from the prime minister himself, rather than having a broad support base among the various key institutions, including the House of Commons). The Americans seem not to understand why their own Middle East allies, such as Saudi Arabia, are voicing vehement opposition against starting a war with Iraq. If war breaks out, Samuel P. Huntington's controversial prognosis could well be fortuitous.

While we commemorate the tragedy of September 11, we must not lose sight of the universal objective of peace. It will be a bigger tragedy to mankind, if the commemoration of 9/11 is marked by the shadow of war. Let us not forget that September was also the month the Germans launched a *blitzkrieg* assault against Poland, signalling the beginning of the cataclysmic conflict of 1939-1945. It may well appear that we continue to suffer man's folly, that of self-destruction and of conflict. The novel idea of transforming swords to ploughshare remains a mere illusion. This is the tragedy.

Acknowledgements

This book is a selected compilation of my weekly columns which appeared in the *New Straits Times* and *The Sun*, leading Malaysian newspapers, over a period of almost three years. I must admit that despite the rush that I had to undergo, as I am a last-minute type of person, I thoroughly enjoyed writing the column. I saw this as a platform for me to comment on current issues, which most of them seem to have an almost permanent presence. The other good thing about the column was that it forced me to put my thoughts on paper, which otherwise one would be hard pressed to do. Unfortunately, due to a change in the ownership of the newspaper, and therefore a policy change, my services were no longer required, resulting in the loss of an avenue to voice my opinion. Nonetheless, the last few years have allowed me a great opportunity to do so and I believe I have made use of the time and space that were offered to me. I thank those who have provided me this chance.

As the articles were quite diverse and sometimes contained a number of prevalent issues in one piece, this volume is conveniently divided into two parts, namely, domestic and international. The issues that I have tackled ranged from global, regional and national to even more parochial interests. I believe that while one can dwell on strategic issues, it is equally important to listen to the ground. Grassroots, after all, are the basis of any system, without which it will all crumble.

In writing my column as well as in the preparation of this book, there are many who have assisted me in one way or another. While it is impossible to name everyone, there are several that I would like to specially mention here. On top of my list must be my family members, in particular, my father, from whom I have learnt so much. I would also like to mention my daughter, who has given me the opportunity

to have a window into her generation. My sincere gratitude goes to my mother and wife, both of whom provided advice and support, without which it would have been impossible for me to undertake so much.

I would like to record my deep appreciation to my dear old friend, Mark James, who took the trouble to read this manuscript. I need to mention my publisher, Ng Tieh Chuan, for his encouragement which has helped me to work harder. He has always been there to provide support for it was him who published my first book, *Gorbachev and the Asia-Pacific Region*, in 1990.

Needless to say, all the shortcomings in this book are entirely mine, and I would also like to apologise to anyone whom I have inadvertently slighted over the years, mainly through my writings.

Abdul Razak Baginda

November 2002

Kuala Lumpur

Part I
DOMESTIC
ISSUES



1

Placing the young at the forefront of development

New Straits Times | November 29, 1999

IT IS BECOMING increasingly obvious that we are now entering the digital age. Some societies are left behind, others are at the threshold, while some others are even at the forefront. Like it or loathe it, the digitisation of society is inevitable.

In Malaysia, there is already an emerging digital generation, comprising the younger segment of our society. There are a number of interesting trends associated with this group.

The first is that they are obviously wired-up and even though they do not own or have access to the world of the Internet, their peers have and they have been influenced by its fast changing shape. As they are connected to the world, they have come to see things quite differently. In other words, they tend to have a very broad perspective of life, which could range from politics to economics and to societal issues.

Concomitant to this is the national environment around them. As they belong to the younger age group, most of whom belongs to the post-1969 generation, they have come to know only of a prosperous Malaysia, the recent economic crisis notwithstanding.

As a result, they are sometimes seen as not being grateful for the benefits they enjoy and, at times, taking it for granted. The government continues to talk of the need for them to be grateful, yet it tends to fall on deaf ears. To some extent, it is like the father constantly reminding his children how hard he has been working to bring prosperity

to the family. His children may not appreciate the father's sacrifices, especially if they currently enjoy all the fruits of the father's hard work.

Although it is important that the young become aware of how prosperity and stability have been achieved, the government and the older generation must also not blame this new generation for their attitude for it is the system that has created them.

In other words, this is part of the learning curve of managing success. It is really a tribute to the system that our young tend to voice their dissatisfaction and uneasiness over local affairs. It would be a sad day if our young merely become a group of obedient people. After all, we often talk of the need to create a much more innovative and creative society. Our hope really lies with the young.

To begin with, to be innovative is to challenge the norms and only when one challenges prevailing ideas that we get to improve and innovate ideas. Therefore, if the young take a critical position over governmental policies, for instance, then this must never be necessarily seen as a bad thing.

We tend to be too defensive when the young disagree with our ideas or policies. We must have a change in our mindset, especially among government officials. We tend to take criticisms as something personal and negative. We must remember that societal change has always stemmed from criticism. This also includes technology and the sciences. Over the centuries, it has always been criticisms that have led to improvement, even in the way we conduct our lives.

The digital generation is itself coping with societal change. They feel that their time has arrived, and yet the society at large and the state do not recognise their role and their position. If we look around us, it is the young who are becoming the great achievers, the innovators and are at the

forefront of development. There will come a time when competitiveness becomes a matter of survival, and it is those with great ideas that will provide the edge over others. Therefore, to put it dramatically, our future lies in their hands.

We need to provide them with the space that would allow them to think critically, whether it involves politics, economics or society. There must be a proper bridge that would allow the young to connect with the other segments of society, including the government. We do not need any more platforms or organisations as there are already so many. What we need is some degrees of attitudinal change from both sides.

On the part of the older generation, they should treat the young with the right kind of respect that they think they deserve. We cannot treat them as if their time hasn't yet arrived. Actually, their time has arrived and we must give them the encouragement they need. The young ones are often told, rather than be heard or recognised.

To the younger generation, they need to understand that the older generation and the government are not used to dealing and coping with more opinionated youths and that attitudinal change will require time and patience. Often, the young would like change to be brought about instantly.

The young of today must be placed at the forefront of our development. We must provide them liberty and allow them to think where the country is heading towards. After all, they are going to inherit from us. Why should we not bring them early into the planning process?

Sometimes, we think that we know it all. Perhaps we do, but as we enter the digital age, with enormous challenges in the societal front, no one is any wiser. It must be remembered that we are not alone in this situation and it is not about the West against the East.

One needs only to travel in Europe and the US to feel the pulse of change. They tend to be more successful as they have given their young their role and space much earlier. We need to do that urgently, for if we do not, we may end up wasting a whole generation that is ever willing to contribute to the building of our nation — a digital generation that is a product of our own success.

..

2

Heeding the young voices of tomorrow's citizenry today

The Sun | July 23, 2000

IT HAS OFTEN BEEN SAID that the future belongs to the young and, with education and international exposure, mainly through the information highway this is indeed true. In Malaysia and elsewhere, the young are at the forefront in accepting changes, a necessity given the enormous economic and societal transformation occurring around us.

However, in many cultures, especially the traditional ones, the younger generation is still restricted in its scope of activities and areas of responsibility. At the same time, there is recognition that with globalisation, we must rely on all available resources to be competitive and innovative. The latter tend to be much more present among the younger population than older groups, whose minds have been quite set and entrenched.

In Malaysia, we can identify three generations. The first is the World War II generation, and these are people who were born before and lived through the Japanese occupation. Some 8.7 per cent of Malaysians belong to this generation. The second is what is often identified as the 1969 generation and these are Malaysians who have a living memory of the riots of May 1969. This group makes up some 21.7 per cent of the population. You then have the young generation and this forms some 69.6 per cent of Malaysians. Statistically, this group is classified as those below the age of 34. Put simply, the young forms the majority of the population and as the years go by this group will grow larger and concomitantly their voice will also be

louder. What are the aspirations of this group and how can their expectations be met?

To begin with, the younger generation is the product of an independent and prosperous Malaysia. The notion that as a result they should be grateful does not seem to resonate among them. They see development as their right and not as a privilege. They argue that it is the job of the government to bring prosperity, as this is what they have been promised in the first place. To the young, this is expected and, after all, it is the people that voted them in.

Such an attitude is similar to the case of the father who constantly reminds his children how lucky they are compared to him when he was growing up. More often than not, it falls on deaf ears. It is not that they are ungrateful or do not love their parents nor appreciate the current prosperity, but it is because that they have grown up in a totally different environment.

Several research studies have shown that it is the socialisation process that helps to mould the character and attitude of a person. In the world of multimedia explosion, it is no wonder that the young are different as they are being shaped by the world they live in. After all, the media has influenced all of us in one way or another.

I recall earlier days when the old now were the young ones then. Those days, they were crazy with the Beatles and of course, the "twist". Those who were influenced by such enjoyment have not necessarily turned out bad. In fact, I am sure many of them have become very successful people. Obviously times have changed, although the principle remains the same.

One could make the case that what is happening to Malaysian society, whether affecting the young or the older generation, is exactly what occurred in many different societies decades ago. Despite the efforts by the state to

inculcate positive moral values through the school system, statistics show that there is a decline in the moral values system.

It could well be that what needs to be re-examined is the method in which this is being taught in the education system. To begin with, such things cannot be taught, but rather, they have to be discussed. Modern methodologies have to be introduced where explanations are stressed, rather than mere principles.

We are very good at memorising principles but not so good at understanding and, more importantly, practicing them. The other explanation is the contradictions in our society that provide justification to some, and confusion to others. While moral issues are being discussed in schools, outside of the classroom the paradox is ubiquitous. Students may even find contradictions among the teachers and in their homes and in public life.

The young today look at the government with a much more critical eye. Not only do they scrutinise state affairs and policies, they also question them. As someone in his twenties said to me the other day, what do you expect when the government is encouraging us to be much more creative and innovative. I guess this stems from the notion that creativity is the exercise of brainpower and this is often predicated on the need to challenge the norms and prevailing ideas. After all, criticism is the basis of innovation.

Therefore, the young are more critical and, sometimes, radical. Again, this is nothing new. Therefore, the older generation should not be too upset or too worried by this trend. The old today were also radicals then. As the saying goes, "Radicals of today are the conservatives of tomorrow." On a more humorous note, following from this logic, the old that are still radical are those that never grew up.

Following from this, they expect the state to be much more accountable, transparent and open to criticism. They appreciate leaders who admit mistakes and squarely approach the subject matter. In this respect, during the incident at Sauk, it is appreciated that the Minister of Defence admitted that there were elements of negligence as well as complacency. Admission is always a good starting point for improvement. One medical doctor told me years ago that one sure way of curing an alcoholic is to first get that person to admit that he is one.

Like previous generations, the young are also influenced by all sorts of factors, from entertainment and popular culture to religion. There are those that accept popular culture with no problems, while others reject it. To some, their rejection has led them to look for alternatives, including religion. Then, there are people who are far more balanced, accepting both, but at the same time being moderate.

The stark reality is that the young will inherit the future and are already shaping perceptions among the population. They are becoming more empowered and will play a far more determinant role in the near future. They will form a substantial portion of the electorate and will voice their opinion, either directly or through the ballot box. All the political parties know and recognise this and are wooing them. In this respect, the government must accommodate the aspirations of the young, rather than getting the young to accommodate the government.

The notion that the state knows it all is no longer applicable. The state cannot even pretend to know all. Similarly, the idea that father knows best is also fast eroding. For instance, my teenaged daughter reads much more than I these days and I admit that I do learn things

from her. I am proud of this fact and I would encourage her to continue to do so.

There is no option left but to hear the young and not merely pay lip service, or indulge in mere rhetoric. Policy formulation, especially involving the future, must bring the young generation into the process. The stakes for the young must be increased so that they genuinely feel that they are part of the process. It is not too difficult to woo the young. We need to listen to and consult them and accommodate their needs, space and aspirations. We cannot afford to ignore the young for they can soon afford to ignore us.

3

Reviving unity in the community

The Sun | July 30, 2000

RECENTLY, my family and I watched on video a movie about Genghis Khan, the Mongol leader who unified his fierce and highly factional tribes. Genghis Khan not only brought unity to his people but also conquered much of Asia. His descendant Kublai Khan even became an Emperor of China.

What I found interesting and relevant of this personage in today's context is the importance of unity in a community. The Malays over the centuries have experienced periods of unity and disunity. Unfortunately however, the Malays are presently undergoing another round of disunity and discord.

I recall in another film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, wherein Peter O'Toole, in his brilliant portrayal of the English officer with a passion for the Arabs, said that if they continue to fight among themselves, they would always remain little people. On a similar note, the Malays appear to be destined to be little people unless they do something about this regrettable state of affairs.

While there may be disputes as to the degree of the present state of Malay disunity, there is a general consensus that they are certainly not as united as they were a decade ago. Some prominent leaders of the community have stated this is so. In fact, one can identify a number of divides among the Malays.

Firstly, there is the political divide. While Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia) has always had a following, never before have the numbers been so significantly large, and spread throughout the peninsular.

Its capture of Terengganu and significant victory in different states, especially in the Malay heartland of the north, clearly indicates this trend. While new voters may have caused this swing, there is evidence to suggest that a significant number of older voters have rejected the United Malay National Organisation (Umno) and voted for PAS instead. I believe they did so not because they favour PAS but rather because of their disappointment with Umno. What is more alarming is the considerably reduced majorities in many once-safe Umno seats. Obviously, if remedial steps — not just cosmetic moves — are not taken, the problem will be serious.

Within Umno, at least in the last general elections, there was less unity than previously. This was apparent when the candidates list was decided, which many thought was a little late. Some unselected hopefuls, instead of giving their best to help the party, packed their bags and left for home. There were even stories of sabotage and working for the Opposition.

Although such incidents were not widespread, it illustrated the kind of behaviour that existed. The political in fighting is often intense, particularly within Umno. There is clearly an erosion of the meaning of struggle among its members. Sometimes, the backers of the leaders at various levels bring about this rivalry.

While competition and contest is a must in any democracy, what is lacking is the sense of camaraderie and a common notion of what the party stands for.

I hear of cases where young professionals were prevented from standing for office because of the potential threat they pose to incumbents, even at the branch level. According to the grapevine, PAS, on the other hand, is offering such young professionals the chance to stand in the next elections.

For the sake of our future, I hope that leaders and those who aspire for political office think less of themselves and more for the community. Bring back the traditional notion of struggling for the community and the country, rather than for self-interests.

Then there is the economic divide. During the heyday of the Malay sultanates, the division in society was between the ruler and the ruled, with a small group of aristocrats. Today, the gap between the haves and the have-nots within the Malay community appears to have widened. A casual observation could lead to the conclusion that there are three Malay communities—the elite, the middle class and the deprived. It is sad to think that in a country that boasts the tallest building in the world there is still a segment of its population living in dilapidated huts. Occasionally, the media would highlight the plight of such people.

No doubt Malaysia is one of the more successful countries to have reduced poverty, but surely we cannot stop at that. With the rising cost of living, we must ensure that every Malaysian has a right to decent living, even if it means that the government should intervene.

It is interesting to see where the middle class stands in the event of any major societal and political crisis. Traditionally, this group supports the elite and the government for it is to them that they are supposedly indebted. However, based on recent trends, even those working in the government did not vote for the ruling party. The middle class is itself divided and could well swing towards the third group—the rejected elite.

This economic divide warrants a closer look by the powers that be. If not addressed, this trend could portend a kind of class struggle which, in a wider context, could cut across racial boundaries. Although this is still a remote possibility as voting pattern appear to be still to ethnic

groupings, it should not be taken for granted. That things have worked out in the past is no guarantee that they will continue to do in the future.

Concomitant to this is the religious division among the Malays. While there is a discernible pattern towards a more fundamental lifestyle within the Muslim community, there are also those who feel somewhat uncomfortable with this. The majority may look upon a fundamental Muslim lifestyle as acceptable and even fashionable, but there are those who are even more extreme in their views. It was quite a shock when the government disclosed that some 44 deviationist groups existed in the country. One wonders how many more Mohd Amins there are in such groups.

I am sure one can identify yet other divisions among the Malays. There is an urgent need to check this trend and bring about unity in the community. As the community is still a top-down society, although one can observe a trend towards empowerment of the people, much rests on the leadership.

A higher quality of leadership will show magnanimity. In the Genghis Khan movie, Genghis pleaded with his life-long nemesis, Jamuga, to join forces even though he could have easily destroyed him. In spite of his generous gesture Jamuga refused.

There is an invaluable lesson here. Those in a position of strength should always consider offering the olive branch to others of the community who may not agree or even oppose them. The Malay community in Malaysia is a small one. Let us ensure that everyone has a stake in the unity of the community.

4

Poverty and development, not race, the real issue

The Sun | December 24, 2000

IT IS AXIOMATIC that during festive seasons, people are happier, even if it is merely temporal. When the food and drinks cease, we resume our routines. It is also during such periods that there are frequent reports of some who will not be as joyful as they should be. Poverty in Malaysia is a subject many would prefer to ignore, but we should take a sober re-look at it seriously given the economic strife we have encountered over the last decade.

Whenever I bring up this subject, the usual response I get is that we are better off than our neighbours. Why do we always compare ourselves with others who are worse off than us, and not those who are better off? We seem embarrassed by this contradiction in our society and economic development.

Nevertheless, we must recognise the seriousness of the problem, and take steps to address it. After all, even the richest countries face the same contradiction as we. In fact, their situations are even more serious, given their enormous wealth. In the US, especially in New York, such inequity is highly visible.

Therefore, we should not be too concerned about the contradictions. The strength of a society lies in its ability to critically see itself and address the issues, rather than ignore them.

The younger generation must remember that poverty used to be a major issue in this country, especially during the formative years. In addressing poverty, one confronts a philosophical issue of approach. Do we merely give fish to a

person or do we teach him to fish? This issue is still fiercely debated in many international organisations.

In Malaysia, we have tried many approaches and generally they have been successful, as seen in the significant rise in the standard of living. The issue here is the pockets of poverty and relative poverty that exist.

In the case of isolated needy families, aid must be immediate. An agency must be identified to do this, rather than having them depend on public generosity, which may or may not be forthcoming. There are agencies which have already been tasked to perform such duties, although the assistance doled out may be insufficient and they could be a little too bureaucratic.

The term "social safety net" has often been bandied about, but if there are those who urgently require assistance, we should act and not dwell unduly on philosophical debate.

In this, I feel religious groups should be involved in 'saving' the truly needy, rather than merely preaching all day. Salvation is one thing, and a decent meal and a roof over one's head is quite another.

I would like to see Islamic charity organisations getting involved in poverty eradication, or respond to the needs of others. Admittedly, Christian organisations have been very successful, for they often work among such groups while preaching at the same time.

Sometimes, I wonder whether they help more than they preach. Their assistance should also be across the board and not merely be religion-based.

The Good Samaritan of all time, the late Mother Teresa, was known not so much for her religious work, but rather for her devotion to the poor. She dedicated her life to help them. Why can't we see similar people emerging in Malaysia?

I would like to address specifically the issue of volunteerism in this country. Over the last week, the Federation of Peninsular Malay Students (GPMS, Gabungan Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung) has made much news. Without questioning their real motive, I would like to see such organisations play a more effective role in addressing, or at least keeping the poverty issue alive, for it involves both Malays and other communities.

Championing Malay rights without addressing the Malay plight best illustrates their move. If indeed GPMS wants to champion Malay rights, it should first stress the distribution of wealth among the Malays.

The issue is not the distribution of wealth among the races, but rather within the Malay community. GPMS should talk about issues that will gain sympathy within the community, rather than playing the racial card.

How do you justify to a poor Malay family that their lives must be so, when they see big Malay businesses getting special privileges? I can understand and sometimes even justify why huge projects are given to such businesses, but it is a herculean task explaining it to those who have difficulty filling their stomachs every day.

Work within your own, and strive for a better Malay community. We have achieved much but we have much more to achieve. The problem is not interracial but intra-racial.

The Malays, the Chinese and all the other ethnic groups have their share of poverty and grievances. If anything, I feel that there are other communities, such as the Indians and the Orang Asli, who require much more attention.

Poverty and economic development do not have a racial bias. Maybe by looking at the poverty issue and championing the plight of poor Malaysians, one does not get

too much notice. Those who have political ambitions may not find such issues attractive enough.

The problem that affects Malaysia today is not racially-based but the equitable distribution of income, and the raising of stakes for all Malaysians.

Fortunately, I believe only a handful of Malaysians today are playing the racial card at the expense of the masses. I actually question their real motive for we must not allow a selfish few to jeopardise the interests of many.

5

Race relations need a steady hand

The Sun | January 28, 2001

PERIODICALLY, Malaysia is featured rather prominently in the international media. Recently, a Hong Kong newsweekly did a cover story on Malaysia which included an exclusive interview with Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Its focus on the often contradictory nature of our racial-cum-religious aspects is particularly interesting. In one paragraph, it examined Dr Mahathir Mohamad's stand on the Suqiu issue and argued *inter alia* that he was trying to woo the support of the Malays.

Frankly, over the years Dr Mahathir has been the least racial in his policies. In fact, it could be argued that he has been rather liberal on the issue of race relations in the country. He abhors racial bigots, from all sides. His stand on the Suqiu issue was really to moderate and manage what was becoming a tense situation involving Malay-Chinese relations. While I have argued that the demands of Suqiu can be accepted and therefore debated, some quarters had reacted vehemently, thereby raising tensions. I have expressed my views on the position of the Malay students' group the Federation of Peninsular Malay Students (GPMS), highlighting its hypocritical stand and questioning its motive.

Be that as it may, Dr Mahathir needs to balance the situation, rather than trying to woo the Malays at the apparent expense of the Chinese. The prime minister is too shrewd to play the racial card as it brings no benefit to the country. He chose instead to defuse and avoid what could

have easily escalated to highly emotional levels of irrationality.

If one looks objectively at Dr Mahathir's policies towards race relations in Malaysia, his record is admirable. He has been fair and moderate towards the Malays as well as with the Chinese and the other communities. If anything, he abhors the racial game as race relations in Malaysia is still in a very delicate state of balance. The need for moderation and understanding outweighs everything else. It has been argued that tolerance is but an understanding of a rather temporary nature. In Malaysia, this issue involves more than just tolerance. There must be accommodation as well and it is this that has brought about the country's success. It may be argued that Malaysia's success rests on the constant management of racial politics at the leadership level. At the societal level, there is less bargaining, although petty politics still play a role. It all boils down to the need to live peacefully together, and not to rock the boat for there is much to lose on everybody's part.

Racial issues can become emotional and when emotions run high, people become irrational. The line separating peace and conflict is precariously thin. We saw in Indonesia how this imploded, resulting in attacks on ethnic Chinese who ended up paying a high price for something they were not responsible for. The failure to distribute economic gains should have been directed at the leadership then, but was misdirected against the Chinese.

We saw elsewhere in Indonesia how misplaced emotions can end up in racial conflagration. Nobody benefited from that sorry state of affairs.

In comparison, Malaysia's equitable distribution of income places it among the very few countries that have been successful in this area. But we must not be too quick to

congratulate ourselves and become complacent. Much still needs to be done.

Our success in narrowing the economic gap between the races was not at the expense of any particular group. The challenge now is to prevent the further widening of an imbalance that clearly exists within some communities, particularly within the Malay community.

One is almost tempted to say that there are some early signs of a class struggle within the group. This issue must be addressed urgently before those who are marginalised become irrational.

While one may not agree entirely with the reporting of the earlier-mentioned news weekly; it was right in pointing out the falling standard of living among the Indians.

I have hinted in previous essays that affirmative action should be taken on behalf of the poor, irrespective of race, and this includes some sectors of the Indian community as well as other marginalised groups such as the Orang Asli. We must do something effective to help them before they become 'irrational'.

Dr Mahathir's moderate stand is well demonstrated in his intolerance of extremists. There is no place for extremism in Malaysia; moderation is the name of the game here. We have seen the government's swift reaction against the Al-Ma'unah. Malaysia must maintain constant vigilance against extremists of whatever race or religion.

A number of writers have identified Dr Mahathir as a nationalist. This he is, but not in the traditional sense of the word, with all its connotations. Rather, he is a nationalist who wants the country to be successful in all fields. His constant push for Malaysia to achieve a higher level of success, either in the fields of technology or in the economy, is relentless. He is also highly independent and his stand on international issues has brought recognition to the

independent role Malaysia plays globally. The prime minister is especially proud when Malaysians succeed in winning international recognition.

Another point worth mentioning is his stand on English. He has advocated the upgrading of this language among Malaysians despite criticisms from many quarters. I have made my views known about such opposition, highlighting the selfishness and lack of concern for the community that those who oppose the move supposedly represent. By encouraging the usage of English, Dr Mahathir has risen above petty politics. His views reflect the internationalisation of the country's economy and its way of life. He must be saddened by the opposition from some quarters, who are actually hindering the very groups that need help.

The challenges ahead are many, and there is a pressing need for us to be more open to, and be more able to accept criticism. We have achieved much in race relations. It is a marvel, but it is not a miracle.

We have worked hard at it. Compromise and accommodation have been the key ingredients in these efforts, and all communities must share a passion for maintaining Malaysia's well-being. We should never ever forget that the process is never-ending, and we need to continuously work at it, for there is just too much fire out there in the world.

Malay action front not in tune with spirit of unity

The Sun | February 18, 2001

ON A FLIGHT HOME recently, I read the editorial of a foreign regional newspaper on Malaysia. Being quite used to reports that are biased against us, I was prepared. The piece focused on the country's racial issue, mainly the aftermath of the now infamous Malay Action Front (MAF) rally two Sundays ago.

The MAF is certainly not fit to use an acronym by which the Malaysian Armed Forces is also known. Thankfully, the racial issue is no longer a major political item. We are proud of this as we have managed the situation relatively well over the years. During times of tension, prudence has always prevailed.

As for the said editorial, it was the MAF's actions and heavy racial undertone that caught its attention. I have always believed that if there is any negative news anywhere, it will be reported. Human nature is such that few would like to read about positive stuff. This brings me to the main item that I would like to comment on and that is the MAF agenda.

I was quite taken aback by not only the blunt remarks made at this inaugural — and I hope last — meeting, but also the symbol used. The keris and the blood could be construed as being offensive, given the non-violent environment that we live in. As this symbol was already known, the authorities should have prevented them from convening for it was obvious that they were inciting racial hatred.

Interestingly, the remarks made on the leadership and problems within the Malay community — rather than the scheduled agenda about Malay rights which, as I have argued, is a non-issue anyway — caught the attention of many.

I have stated that if they criticise the New Economic Policy (NEP) — and now the National Development Policy (NDP) — too much, then they are really criticising themselves for the NEP did uplift the community, of which they are obviously a part. Talking about Malay rights, is also inappropriate as it is already an undisputed item in the Malaysian context. To harp on it is like asking the government to re-introduce black and white television.

Many have remarked that the people associated with the MAF are not the best nor the most respected personalities in the Malay community, let alone in the country. After all, its key personalities have themselves benefited from the NEP, as did most of the Malay community since the early 1970s.

There are many interpretations to evaluate the NEP's efficacy but none can deny its overall success in bringing the Malays to the mainstream of economic activity in this country. The dispute is within the Malay community and in its distribution.

While there are some genuine concerns, the criticism against recent government actions may be somewhat misplaced and are due more to a lack of information. This is where the government could create more platforms for dialogues to bridge the gap in understanding between the government and the governed.

Call in the relevant groups and discuss possible actions. In this way, not only will the government have a feel of likely reactions, but it will also keep the community concerned informed as well as feel that it is being consulted.

While this may be a tedious process, it would certainly avoid the types of public reaction that we have been getting recently.

Coming back to the MAF, the public should take this group to task about their real motives. Like everything else, it smells political. I am glad their so-called roadshow is not going ahead for they are not in sync with the current spirit of Malay unity. On the contrary, they appear more to be spoilers.

As for the Malay unity talks, kudos to Umno for not setting preconditions and facilitating a community atmosphere. But it is also important that we are patient and not raise our expectations too high. Nevertheless, things can only get better with communication lines now open.

I started with the Western media and would like to end with ours.

Here I must register my disappointment with a 'leading' English daily which carries pro-Jewish pieces on the present Palestinian crisis. While we are unhappy with foreign agencies when they write about Malaysia, some among us seem quite happy to use their reports of the Palestinian issue. An even-handed treatment is called for. While the West may be more in sympathy with Israel, let us also hear from the Palestinians.

Begin with an honest admission of racial divide

The Sun | March 18, 2001

RECENTLY, it is sad that we had to see some people in this country resorting to violence and taking the law into their own hands. Luckily, the situation appears to be contained now. The episode had all the elements of a racial riot — violence, death and the infamous rumour-mongering.

What do we learn from all this? To begin with, we are still a very precariously teetered society. Any quarrel that involves different ethnic groups can easily escalate into a race-based polemic, putting it on a different perspective altogether. So much so that when I see a road accident, I can't help but feel a little relieved when those involved are from a different race.

If it is such that each community is still in the habit of treating others on racial terms, then we had better not kid ourselves that we have been successful in managing our race relations. If we are unable to suppress the latent racism in us, it would be only a matter of time before it finds a violent aggression — as we have seen from the latest outbreak in Selangor.

The government must take these issues seriously and perhaps commission an eminent group to conduct a post-mortem. If the findings suggest that it was race-based, then so be it. We must not pretend that all is well and sweep it under the carpet. If it was not racial, then the causes should be identified.

The commission should also look at some of the recommendations put forward. I was taken aback by a recent suggestion that more unity-type programmes be

organised. Over the years, we have had so many of these, apparently ineffective for the most part. We need more creative concepts which deal with fundamental issues, not cosmetics.

When government agencies draw up new programmes, they must get the different communities involved.

Community programmes must always be from the bottom upwards, and not in the other direction. Such ideas must be genuinely felt; otherwise we are just wasting time and resources. When it comes to violence, in this case racially based, there are always two sides to the story. How did a routine quarrel become a racial matter?

The human mentality is such that an attack against a member of one community is often seen as an attack against all members of that group. In this respect, Malaysians are no different from others around the world. Most of the time, we suppress this instinct and think of the wider picture or possible consequences. This separates us from the animals which rely on their instincts. Humans have the ability to rise above violence with their power to reason. Following from this, those who resort to violence resemble animals.

After all, we have the police. They are there to solve disputes and to contain problems. However, they must be given the opportunity to play this role. The police must be the first, and not the last, resort.

In this respect, it would be better if our police force is better represented racially so that Malaysians of all races can go to them without fear of racism. We find this in the United Kingdom (UK) and many other multiracial societies. In Britain, efforts have been made to recruit more non-Caucasians to the force. Today, although more could be done, you do find them on the beat.

Was the root cause of this recent outbreak ignorance associated with racial prejudice? Surely not, for it had been

drummed into all of us about the existence of different races in the country for the past decades.

Was it due to economic deprivation? Maybe, and this is one possible explanation that we must not ignore. The Indian community has been identified as one of the most deprived in the country. Surely, this state of affairs can and must be rectified.

It is interesting that the government has come out to say that development, especially in housing, will be brought to the area where the conflict first broke out. Kampung Medan residents have, time and time again lamented on their depressed living conditions and presumably, their laments have fallen on deaf ears. I understand that promises had been made to them, but obviously empty ones.

Why is it that something extreme has to happen before the authorities take note?

This creates a dangerous precedent. Does it mean that residents who are unhappy with their living conditions must resort to violence before development is brought to them? I hope this is a real lesson to all concerned.

For one, local governments should on their own initiative be able to identify deprived areas under their administration — particularly the potentially explosive ones — then as a pre-emptive measure, address the grievances of the inhabitants concerned.

The Kampung Medan incident shows that poverty is still very much a part of Malaysia, in this case urban poverty. To those who have argued that we have done well in eradicating poverty and are a model to the world, think again.

The recent riots have eroded our image abroad. Yes, foreign reports have been biased against us, but then this is nothing new. We may complain as much as we want, but it was Malaysians who caused the riots. We have brought this

upon ourselves; we have destroyed our own image. The foreign media, with their negative motives where Malaysia is concerned, had a field day.

Much has been said and written on the need to maintain racial harmony. This latest episode shows that there are still people in our midst willing to jeopardise peace for their own gain.

We must respond quickly and I do hope that the government will be proactive enough to convene that aforesaid commission right away. I would even suggest that half of its membership be drawn from the groups who had experienced these incidents.

8

It is time for some humility and a higher aim

The Sun | May 20, 2001

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO, Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited Dubai and was impressed with the developments there. I had the privilege of spending a short time in Dubai recently on my way back home. Apart from a trip to Cairo some five years ago, this trip was made while on transit in the Gulf region, marking my first visit to the Middle East. I must say that I agree with the prime minister.

The city is most impressive with visible development taking place. I told the taxi driver to take me to the city centre and he actually took me to this big shopping centre that boasts many European department stores. It was sophisticated and quite well patronised. I must admit that I was pleasantly surprised. The streets appear clear and reasonably planned, although I found that there were too many taxis.

I actually tried to analyse its success and would like to attribute it to two factors: first, it is politically stable; and second, it is a state open to the world and believes that it should not be held back by tradition.

The Sultanate provides a high degree of stability. Although it will always be fearful of political rumblings from the interior, it provides adequate amenities and development to earn the people's support. In terms of development, it welcomes foreign investments. I think Dubai is pragmatic enough to know that its strong religious beliefs do not hinder its development plans and that it can bring modernity to its people.

I think many Muslims, who sometimes suffer from a closed mind, should see the excellent blending between religion and modernity as exemplified by Dubai. One need not be too hung up about one's religion.

One thing I learnt during my brief visit there is that we in Malaysia, while we can be proud of our achievements, should be more humble — instead of telling everyone how great we are when we are really not. After seeing Dubai, Malaysia is neither as special nor unique as we often say.

True, one cannot compare a small Gulf state to Malaysia with its different ethnic make-up. But I think we suffer from an inflated notion of ourselves and get taken in quite easily by praises from visitors.

Yes, Malaysia has done well, especially when compared to some struggling African states, but I think it is about time that we compare ourselves with those from a higher level and be a little more humble.

On the same trip, I was on a Malaysia Airlines (MAS) flight and did not feel like reading. So, I watched the video about Malaysia. I found the video for the arriving visitor to be informative and observed that it projects the country well. However, I have a number of observations that I hope either Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) or MAS would take note of.

The most glaring is some out-of-date information. The video talks about the next millennium. Well, just in case some of us are not aware, we are already half way through 2001.

Then there are the currency control forms, which obviously are no longer in force. There is also the part about MAS's 'biggest' lounge in the world. I have been to many airport lounges, but certainly am never impressed with MAS's. We tend to be obsessed with size, but pay little attention to content and substance, and maintenance.

When I was at the Dubai airport, I was in the Emirates lounge and I was most impressed. Not only was the layout impressive, but the food spread was arguably one of the best in the world. It actually serves hot food, and has a small buffet. Had I known that, I would have saved some money and not eaten lunch outside. So perhaps MAS should think more of the content and quality of its service, rather than mere bricks and mortar.

Talking about airports, I must say that structurally KLIA is very impressive, even when compared to Dubai's new airport which is quite cumbersome for those going to the terminal. Too many platforms, I would imagine.

However, KLIA's maintenance needs a little more attention. To begin with, the toilets could be cleaner, and more importantly, they should work.

KLIA appears to be quite impersonal too; visitors need to be made to feel more welcome. Recently, I noticed that the pricing of food in the outlets at the airport is almost twice the price those bought from outside. I can imagine the price of *nasi lemak* to be pricey as it depends on what you put on your plate. However, if standard items in Kuala Lumpur's outlets are much cheaper than in KLIA, I think this needs some explanation.

There is some concern that KLIA is losing important clients, such as Qantas, Lufthansa, British Airway, Aeroflot, and for a short period, All-Nippon Airways. I think there should be an independent study commissioned to critically look at the reasons for this.

I think the fact that KLIA is not a convenient hub for Southeast Asia has something to do with it. I myself think that Singapore and Bangkok are the more natural hubs of the region. It is so convenient to take flights around the world from these two airports.

The second, following from the first, is business. Often flights are empty and at the end of the day, airlines need profits. Let us stop giving excuses, but rather improve the situation. There must be an explanation for this; we just need to get to the bottom of things.

I understand that MAS is well on its way to restructuring itself. Malaysians are hopeful that the airline could regain its lost glory.

As a frequent traveller, I think it is about time that MAS listens to its customers. If only it listens more to complaints and less to praises, and puts service along with safety at the top of its agenda, I am confident that the airline can see considerable improvements.

Cult fever suggests overhaul of moral instruction needed

The Sun | July 22, 2001

MANY Malaysians must have been quite shocked at the news regarding the existence of a strange cult in the northern states of the country. Their activities seem to come right out of a Hollywood horror movie. The movement appears to involve the Malay community, although one would have assumed that it would be non-Malays. The existence of such a group begs a fundamental question: why have such cults emerged in this country?

I have been arguing for almost a decade that there is little difference among societies, in whatever part of the world. The society is a reflection of a country's state of development. Western societies are obviously different from ours, not because they are mainly Caucasian, but because they have been developed for a longer time.

I believe we will soon be like Western societies if we allow nature to take its course. The emergence of such cults has been happening in the West for some time now. The ones that are tied to devil worshipping have been in existence for centuries. Even in this country such things have been around for a while.

However, what we witnessed recently appears to be similar in fashion to the happenings in some Western countries. It could well be that their leaders or founders have been 'trained' by similar groups in other parts of the world or at least have been influenced by them.

The erosion in our society is already obvious. Increasing numbers of child abuse cases, spouse beating, divorces and such breakdowns in family relationships (including the

young running away from their homes and juvenile delinquency) are all symptoms of a deteriorating society. This trend cuts across racial boundaries, although some ethnic groups appear to be much more affected.

While many in the public life have highlighted this trend, the question is, how do we prevent it? Is it inevitable because it is tied to the country's economic development?

To combat this trend, remedial efforts must be undertaken collectively. Every segment of society has a role to play, from families to schools and the state. Religious teachers must also take heed. For decades now, there has been much more religious teaching. Apparently this has not prevented the deterioration of familial values.

In other words, there is no correlation between the increasing religiosity of a society with positive moral values. On the contrary, one could argue that there seems to be a reverse trend.

Is there something wrong with the way we teach moral values and religion to the young? Whatever the case, the figures do not look good. We need to look at how religion is being taught, or whether it should be taught at all.

On my part, I do not recall any moral issues being taught when I was growing up. Certainly, religion was not so prominent then. In our schools today, religious instruction is an integral part of the system, and yet it appears to have little impact on our society.

Cynically, one could say that the more we teach our young moral values, the greater the deterioration. We need to re-examine our teaching methods, and perhaps emphasise counselling, rather than punishment.

While the Malay society appears to be more religious-oriented, there is a corresponding reverse trend in its moral fabric. Is our religiosity merely skin-deep and ritualistic?

A study needs to be done. If the system is wrong, how can we find a societal cure? If the right measures are not taken, we will be no different from Western societies.

On a different subject, it appears that the experts have put forth that the fire at the Dewan Tunku Cancellor (Tunku Chancellor Hall) could be the result of electrical failure, and may not be arson as was believed earlier. Consequently, following a call from some quarters that the vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaya (UM) should resign, there was a "Support your Vice-Chancellor" signature campaign.

I would think the issue is not about supporting your vice-chancellor, but of ensuring that such incidences do not recur. Are those concerned not serious in looking at the problem, so much so that they could spend time on such a campaign? Surely there are more important things to do.

Academic excellence should be the pursuit of any university, and I am not convinced that this is the case here. The prime minister was visibly upset over the poor performance of our students who prefer to indulge in politics, rather than study.

This problem has been building up over the years. The authorities should admit that by lowering standards, they have inadvertently encouraged students not to study hard. This mindset needs to be changed before we will see any improvement.

Dr Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew oint the way for bureaucrats

The Sun | September 9, 2001

OBSERVERS of Malaysia-Singapore relations will certainly be relieved with the agreement reached a few days ago. There was no doubt that kudos must be given to the two leaders Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Senior Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew, for their resolve and determination to move the relationship forward.

There are some who were surprised by the speed with which the agreement was reached. I would only attribute this to the roles played by the two leaders. They have taken the initiative and moved away from the bureaucrats, who presumably have been adamant and procrastinating, hence the stalemate in relations. This latest exercise shows the importance of a strong and determined leadership, which clearly exists in both countries.

This agreement also illustrates the pragmatism of both leaders. It is hoped that the bureaucracy from both sides will follow the lead of the two leaders, instead of their own myopic thinking. The agreement established could well provide the right kind of framework for a mature relationship, one that is more realistically structured, rather than one imbued with a heavy dosage of emotions. There is no doubt that new challenges will emerge in the future, but with this framework, both sides will be able to deal with them in a much more professional manner.

Malaysia-Singapore relations are critical to both sides from all perspectives; political, economic as well as race relations. Most of the outstanding issues are the result of historical legacy and with it, a high emotional content. The

relationship cannot be taken for granted and the constant contact between the two sides can only be good. This must be continued and stepped up.

Of late, there has been much discussion on human rights in Malaysia, mainly following the report by the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam). I agree with the prime minister when he argued that we should not be influenced by a Western interpretation of human rights. We must admit that many of us have been unduly influenced by such Western concepts.

There are many issues in this context that one could highlight. I would, however, like to dwell on two points. The first is the different emphasis between individual and community rights. I believe that in developing societies and economies, the rights of the community should take precedence over that of the individual. This does not mean that the individual should be ignored. It should never be seen as a zero-sum game.

There is also a discrepancy in the rights of the individual over the community, especially when a small group is threatening the peace and stability of the country. There is always the silent majority. If that majority remains silent, then the minority will indeed rule over them. We cannot allow this to happen. Therefore, we need to ensure that citizens voice their opinion and their support for the government.

The other issue is over the right to a good life and of a high standard of living. What is the point of championing human rights when poverty and deprivation are ubiquitous? Look at some of our neighbours, who claim to be not only democratic, but are champions of human rights. In these countries, there is a wide gap between the haves and the have-nots. I see little point in having a good human

rights record while ordinary citizens do not enjoy a reasonable standard of living.

I think Malaysians should be aware that there is such a thing as the rights of the community, which I believe is paramount. Public safety is of the utmost importance and the government is obliged to ensure that it is maintained.

We have recently seen the ugly threat of militant Islam surfacing. We know of the horrendous crimes committed in the name of Islam, where women and children have been slaughtered. No one wants this to happen in this country and that is why we should stand up and support the government's actions. However, I still think that the government should consult the public more and accept constructive criticism with open arms and ears. Many of those who have been critical only meant well.

As far as I am concerned, the record of the government on human rights is something that needs to be discussed in the right perspective, one that reflects a Malaysian interpretation, rather than a Western and an alien one. Under scrutiny, the West too falters. We must now adopt a much more comprehensive approach. In this respect, Malaysia can play a positive role in taking the lead to come out with a much broader interpretation of human rights. I am sure we are not alone in our frustrations with the domination of Western concepts.

11

Racial harmony will grow from social integration

The Sun | July 29, 2001

DR Mahathir Mohamad has come out with a new approach to bring about greater racial harmony with what he refers to as 'townships'. I think it is about time that such an approach is tested for it is only through living together that we can forge a sense of racial harmony. If we have racial or ethnic enclaves, we will never achieve a feeling of unity.

Unfortunately, there are too many racially distinct areas in Malaysia. If these have been developed historically then I think the government needs to break the trend and encourage multiracial communities. There are racial enclaves in Kuala Lumpur that I hope could be opened up one day: for instance, Malays in Kampung Baru and Datuk Keramat; Indians in Brickfields and Sentul; and Chinese in Jinjang and Kepong.

I was fortunate to have grown up in a racially mixed neighbourhood. Though born in Kuala Lumpur, I only began living here when I was seven years old. We lived in Setapak Garden, which I believe still has a balanced racial composition. My immediate neighbours were Chinese and Indians. I also went to a racially mixed school, at Jalan Kuantan, and I recall that my teachers were also from different ethnic groups.

In recent years, to a large extent, new housing developments in predominantly single-race townships have diluted racial monopoly. However, this must somehow be engineered, as envisioned by the prime minister, in order to hasten the process. Clearly, we cannot let nature take its

course, for it is natural for human beings of the same stock to stay together.

It has been observed that the more affluent you are, the less likely will you get racial enclaves. There appears to be a correlation between racial integration and wealth, at least in terms of housing choices.

I sometimes feel that the government should push harder for integration by closing down mono-ethnic schools, which must also include the fully residential schools that only admit Malays. They should be racially mixed. How do you expect these youngsters to understand other ethnic groups when they do not have the opportunity to mingle with the others? We cannot blame them for finding themselves in such a situation. I think we need to take a serious look at our education system as a critical medium towards better racial harmony. Let us not pretend that we have been successful in achieving this.

We must admit that what we have achieved is the avoidance of racial conflict, in other words, we have merely managed race relations without necessarily addressing the issues. As some observers have mentioned, we have been successful because we have not altered the racial balance.

To a certain extent, this has worked, and if it has worked for decades, why should we change our approach? The difference is that there is no certainty that what appears to be right so far will remain so in the future. It seems clear that our biggest challenges today as a nation are socially related. Whether it is about the youth, the erosion of moral values, the increase in deviant religious belief or unethical business practices, all our ills are attributed to society.

Dr Mahathir is seen to be the only person in the country with the moral courage to call a spade a spade. Whether he highlights his frustration over the academic under-achievements of young Malays or their lack of a

competitive ethos, he does it as a way to get us off our laurels and accept the challenges that come our way.

There is so much contradiction in our society. Most recently, the Cabinet decided to meet specially to discuss the problem of the youth. The Black Metal cult group should alert us that something somewhere is not right. There will be some who would say that we are making a fuss over an isolated case and that too much attention has been given to a small group. That may well be so, but one should look at the larger picture — that the group could be symptomatic of a wider susceptibility to such wayward influences.

I think we should be serious in this and not take it lightly. The contradictions, which I have on several occasions pointed out, are worrisome. It would seem that the more we emphasise religion, the more 'vice' we get. Why is this so?

I believe that much has to do with the way we teach religion to the young, with the emphasis on ritual as opposed to its true meanings. We should be a little more truthful with ourselves and admit that we have made mistakes.

12

Let reason reign in race relations

The Sun | August 12, 2001

WHAT A RIOT it must have been at the recent Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) Youth assembly. With chairs flying and hair splitting, no wonder our youth are a confused bunch. If such a respected political organisation can behave in such an unruly manner, what messages are we trying to give to our young? While one can appreciate the emotive nature of the assembly, with the apparent split over the takeover of Nanyang Press Holdings, to resort to violence is obviously going over the top.

Man should reason, instead of resorting to violence. Surely after all these years of evolution and civilisation, we have finally reached the age of reason?

What the government is planning on the meritocracy issue is a shock treatment to the Malay community and, again, reason should prevail. I would like to plead with the Malays to try and understand that the perpetuation of mediocrity works to the disadvantage of the community itself. What Dr Mahathir Mohamad is doing is something that has to be done. Doing it in stages is the best approach since it allows for adjustments.

To the non-Malay community, please control your expectations as the government is slowly adjusting to this realisation. Coming out now with further demands may not be prudent. We have been able to debate on our success in race relations and managed to avoid open conflict. This has been achieved through understanding and tolerating each other's needs.

However, there are still people who argue that mere tolerance is not good enough. However, given the circumstances and the highly emotive nature of defending ethnic rights, achieving tolerance is already commendable. I look around the world and am thankful for the environment we have in Malaysia. However, we cannot take things for granted and rest on our laurels. Given the delicate racial balance in this country, no group should have more at the expense of others.

Alternative channels must be created and in this we have been quite successful. For instance, the lack of university places has influenced the government to allow private education institutions to flourish. They may be more expensive, but at least there are alternatives. I also understand that funds are available.

While we may moan about things here, racism here does not have the sort of violent expression manifested in many parts of the world. For instance, the black community in the UK and the US are still victims of racism. Since 1991, some 489 people in the UK have died while under police custody, and the majority of them have been blacks. The situation is worse in the US. The most frustrating of all is that the wrongdoers have not yet been brought to justice.

Then, there was the Diallo case, where a Guinean-born street vendor was shot 41 times by four white New York policemen. He was found to have only a set of keys, a pager and a wallet. The mayor of New York refused to suspend the officers involved, and instead blamed the media for playing up the incident.

Thus, while racism is very much alive and kicking in the West, the people there have the audacity to lecture us on democracy and human rights abuse. The kind of racism that exists in the West is not found here and we must do our bit to ensure that it never will. That is why I think we should

ignore the West when they accuse us of abuse. What we need to do when criticised is to be prepared with figures and cases showing the situation in the very country that dictates to us.

However, two wrongs do not make a right. Nor should we find comfort in the abuses that occur in the West. August 6, the anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, was commemorated by the Malaysian Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (MPPNW) with a public forum. Its chairman, Dr Ronald McCoy, has been a champion of the organisation's principles.

Someone once said that war is hell. No one benefits from it, and yet, despite its obvious horrors, man continues to engage in conflicts.

As a realist, I recognise that the need to maintain a credible deterrent force for conflict prevention is the most important role of any military force now. Ironically, the Latin phrase, *Si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war) is arguably the most acceptable stance, though not necessarily the best. Running the risk of being severely criticised, I have always subscribed to this view and nothing in history has managed to convince me otherwise.

Until such time when violence is outlawed internationally and guaranteed — which everyone knows is impossible — we need to maintain a high level of deterrent capability.

At the end of the day, it is about the need to have a balance between defence and development. Development is impossible if peace is sacrificed. In Malaysia, we will continue to have a good balance between guns and butter, or in our case, guns and *nasi lemak*.

13

Approach racial issues maturely

The Sun | December 23, 200

MALAYSIA'S SUCCESS is due to many factors, one of which is its racial composition. It is undeniably a great asset. While multiracial countries the world over may have their particular problems, Malaysia's many races have been a blessing in disguise and has made the country stronger and richer. While everyone has accepted certain norms, such as those behind the New Economic Policy (NEP, now the National Development Policy), of late there has been a general perception of its erosion. The government's recognition of meritocracy for university entrance is a case in point.

In more recent times, we have had news of possible racial segregation in the education system. This is really nothing new and we should not go overboard over it. There already exist Chinese and Tamil schools that run against the grain of nation-building. There are also the fully residential schools that are mainly for the Malays. Surely these constitute racial segregation.

There will be those who would make a distinction between these institutions and the national type schools. But we need to keep things in focus. I am against any racial segregation, and I advocate the abolition of all monolithic schools, even private ones, for they are the breeding grounds for racial prejudice and ethnocentrism—which is anathema to nation-building. We should have only national-type schools.

I have come across Malays who advocate the abolition of Chinese and Tamil schools, but support Malays-only

institutions. We cannot have it both ways. If we contend that Chinese and Tamil schools should be abolished, then we must accept that all the *asrama penub* (boarding schools) schools be similarly treated. In this way, we would then have truly national-type schools.

But I am not sure whether we, as a nation, are prepared to open up a debate on racial segregation. It could well open up a Pandora's box for when it comes to such issues, people tend to become emotional and rationality suffers. The ambitious sorts will jump at the opportunity to ignite all kinds of negative feelings.

The government has to take charge and provide direction on the debate. I am not suggesting censorship, but rather that the government should provide a platform on which debates can be controlled. At the same time, total denial would be wrong. We should be positive and recognise that this is an issue that needs to be addressed and managed.

The stakeholders must be brought into the debate and we should not kill the messenger, but rather examine their messages. This is the sign of a mature nation and this is what we should strive to be.

So what about this issue of racial segregation at the class level? Should classes at the primary and lower secondary levels be based on meritocracy? I don't think it is a good idea to do this. I believe classes at these levels should be racially and intellectually balanced.

Their composition should not be changed from Standard One to Form Five. We may have changes at the individual level for a variety of reasons, but as a guideline they should not be altered. Parents who have children at the top of the class should spare a thought for the others. After all, the top student may not be too much of a social animal and may encounter difficulty when he or she starts to work.

Besides, the less intelligent student needs encouragement and may benefit from associating with the better students.

Therefore, classes should constitute balanced groups. Likewise, the so-called brilliant-type secondary schools into which entry is based on a student's *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR, Evaluative Examinations for Primary Schools) results should also be opened up.

After all, what is the objective of primary and even lower secondary education? I believe it is not solely about grades and performance, but rather it is about nurturing a well-rounded student. This must be stressed and parents must realise that grades alone do not determine a child's future. There is a national obsession with examination results, even at the lower levels. Parents actually send their children for private tuition at the primary levels. During my time, private tuition only began at Forms Three or Five.

The Ministry of Education should look into this. However, our officials tend to be very conservative and fight shy of responsibility. Decision-making also tends to be too centralised and very little debate actually takes place.

Greater transparency and consistency is necessary. If the Ministry talks about the need to produce well-rounded students, they should do away with this fast track roach for high performers. After all, there is little correlation between performance in school and later success in life. Success is about a holistic understanding of life; it is not just about passing examinations. The Ministry must send out the right messages.

I am not downplaying the importance of examinations. The National Union of the Teaching Profession's (NUTP) revelation of the number of schools involved in racial streaming and the denial by some quarters could well lead to a no-win situation. The Ministry must hold a dialogue session with the NUTP. After all, education is a national

issue and it touches upon the entire population. The Ministry must institute a more effective feedback system.

All in all, I believe the government is trying its best to be responsive and I think we have moved forward. Let us hope that the Ministry will not regress and undo the improvements that we have seen in governance.

14

Rendering unto Mr Chips his well-deserved dues

The Sun | October 22, 2000

MOST PEOPLE would agree on the critical role teachers play in the education of our children, and to set it against a broader perspective, towards the development of our human resource.

However, there appears to be a decline in the profession. Yet, we place our future generation in their hands. Much has been said and debated on the reasons for this decline, and many remedies have been proposed for the improvement of the profession.

For what it is worth, I would like to join in this motley debate with a number of observations.

The first concerns the status of the profession. While we talk of the critical role they play, we somehow do not hold them in high regard or esteem. In fact, on the contrary, Malaysian society views the profession with scant respect and accords its incumbents a rather low social status.

Why is this so?

There has been a general shift in local perceptions of the various professions in our society. Unfortunately, in our pervasive spirit of materialism, the more lucrative professions are the ones that are accorded the greatest respect.

In short, it is not that the teaching profession is looked down upon; it is just that the other professions have gone up in status.

I often hear the older teachers reminiscing about earlier times when they were very much respected. In the villages, a teacher was often regarded as wise and influential.

It is interesting to note that in other societies, teachers are still very much respected, the all-pervasive influence of materialism notwithstanding. Japan, China and South Korea epitomise such societies. In these countries, the image of teachers has withstood the test of time.

I still recall the Malaysia of decades past when the term *cikgu* (teacher) elicited much respect. Today, it is no longer so. We will have to wait and see whether this is a passing phase or something permanent. However, I believe we should take some strong measures to render to teachers the respect that they rightly deserve.

To begin with, their salaries must be increased for a number of reasons. We often forget the critical role that teachers play in the bringing up of our children, and of our future generations.

Our children spend some six hours a day, five days a week in school. They are 'educated' and undergo a process of learning in which they will obtain some form of qualification, a passport for employment, whatever the level or grade.

The obtaining of this 'passport' is the joint responsibility of teachers, parents and peer groups. The extent of their commitment depends on the availability of the various parties.

There are instances where parents rely entirely on the teachers to do the 'educating', while others make efforts to contribute. Much depends on the individual family.

Notwithstanding the various roles played in the education of a child, the role of teachers is a constant factor in most cases. To put it dramatically, our future generations is in their hands.

Based on this, their salaries should therefore reflect the critical role that they play. The government should not be too petty when it comes to increasing the salaries of

teachers, although one is aware of the overall budgetary implications, given the huge size of the teaching profession.

One is also aware of the constant upgrading of the teaching profession which has been undertaken by every minister of education. This process must be a continuous one, whereby the performance of teachers is reviewed on a regular basis.

The second aspect involves the training of teachers. Given the rapid changes in teaching methodology, especially with the information technology (IT) explosion, teaching skills must constantly be upgraded to keep up with the times.

Computer literacy must be regarded as a priority. It is pointless for the government to talk endlessly about the importance of IT, when teachers are being neglected in this area. It is irresponsible of the powers that be to leave computer literacy to the teachers themselves. In view of the large numbers involved, the process will take time. But this should not be used as an excuse to deny them IT training.

A training schedule should be drawn up to cover the whole profession in stages. We often talk of creating a critical mass for IT, and what better way than to let the teaching profession to form the core of this mass. It should be stressed that teachers constitute an excellent multiplier effect.

This programme must be regarded as a necessity, not an option. We certainly would not want a scenario where the students are more competent in computers than their teachers. This would inflict irreparable damage to their image.

It has been observed that the Ministry of Education is highly bureaucratic, and red tape is what hinders progress. Therefore, the time has come for the teachers to be

empowered so that they are able to progress faster at their own pace, rather than have some officials dictate to them.

Obviously, teachers themselves must promote their own profession. At a higher level, university lecturers must produce works that will contribute to local know-how. It is inexcusable for Malaysians to rely wholly on foreign works on Malaysia, when we have people who are well-qualified for the task.

In this regard, universities should place greater premium on published works in the career prospects of teaching staff. One hears that published works have never been a criterion for promotional exercises as it would adversely affect some incumbents. It would seem that administrative experience commands a far greater premium, which is absurd as academics are not administrators.

To restore respect to the teaching profession that it richly deserves requires not only the government's efforts, but also society's inputs. In that 1939 classic, *Goodbye, Mr Chips*, a dedicated teacher exemplifies all that is good about the teaching profession. It is time that we go back to that age when teachers occupy the high end of the societal spectrum, and viewing *Goodbye, Mr Chips* may be a good beginning.

Treat English as a medium for gaining knowledge

The Sun | December 31, 2000

A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO, Dr Mahathir Mohamad said that you are not disloyal and are no less a nationalist if you acknowledge the importance of English. I greatly sympathise with the prime minister as I believe such criticisms come from a very small minority who cares little for the community that they supposedly represent. To some extent the prime minister has come under criticism from this group as he has been advocating the importance of English and has done much to try and improve its usage among Malaysians.

Many Malaysians, including myself, share the same view as the prime minister. I feel somewhat embarrassed because it takes the prime minister to publicly say that you need not be disloyal, as if that is the case. Obviously, there are people out there who are accusing those who stress the use of the English language of being disloyal.

There is a consensus today that the standard of English in this country has dropped considerably over the last two decades. With the rapid internationalisation of the Malaysian economy and —like it or loathe it— globalisation, there is a need to place greater emphasis on the English language. This is not only being recognised in Malaysia but also in many other countries. In Japan, for instance, English is being emphasised, as compared to other European languages. I understand that even in Europe, English is stressed, even among the French.

In stressing its importance, no one is saying that this would mean the erosion of other languages, especially the Malay language. This must not be seen as a zero-sum game.

In Malaysia we have seen the successful transformation from an English-dominated education to a Bahasa Malaysia system. One whole generation has passed through it, and, I would argue, with mixed results. I know there are people who argue that while Malay is now readily used, this is not commensurate with the rise in its standard. There are others who maintain that this is being achieved at the expense of English.

The most unfortunate thing is when the schools oppose the emphasis on English, they view the language as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end.

Language, to me, is only a means to an end, which is imperative in the quest for knowledge. I have always argued that one may speak whatever language one is most comfortable with as long as it ensures the acquisition of knowledge. As English is the *lingua franca* of knowledge — although not entirely nor exclusively so — so be it. Look at the Internet, where English is the most dominant language used. If you are not competent in English, then the Internet is merely a blank page.

I share the view of the prime minister when he said that one could be as patriotic as the next person even if he or she speaks good English. It does not mean that if one speaks English, one is less nationalistic, and therefore is not loyal. I would go further and say that a Malaysian who speaks good English and uses his competence to acquire knowledge in this country is far more patriotic than those who speak fluent Malay, but fails to use it for the benefit of the country. Some people may speak good Malay but if they decide merely to sit under the coconut tree and complain about

those who speak good English, then I think we should not waste our time addressing them.

I believe that those who are against the use of the English language are selfish, and are not thinking of the Malay community that they believe they represent.

I think it is in the interest of the Malay community that English is stressed upon them, given the standard of the language among this group. Sadly, this issue cuts the racial divide. I know that the Malays are at a disadvantage in the job market and therefore lose out in the more lucrative positions. Therefore, if such groups really think for the benefit of the Malays, then they should also stress the use of English in schools, especially in the rural areas.

Then, there is the issue of the teachers themselves. Unfortunately, the rural-urban divide has taken a toll. More often than not, the not-so-good English teachers end up in rural schools. Why is this so? I think the officials of the Ministry of Education must be brought to task to answer this. To those who champion the Malays, why don't they ask the Ministry this question?

The Malays must be taught good English, like everyone else. Obviously, there is no national standard for English. It must also be stressed that speaking the language is as important as writing it. It is time we leave this language debate behind and move on. A society that gets bogged down by language issues are doomed to remain in the backwaters, while those that are practical develop at a much more dynamic pace. The most unfortunate thing about the language debate in Malaysia is that those who are against the stress on English represent only a small minority. As I have argued, they have been the beneficiaries of an English system and speak fluent English themselves. They have obtained advanced degrees from abroad and would be only too happy to spend more time in the UK or the US for their

sabbaticals and seminars. Yet, they want to deny the majority the benefits of using the English language. It is about time that such hypocrisy is exposed and that Malaysians be given the chance to regain their mastery of the language, which is after all only a medium for knowledge.

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Critical thinking essential for quality universities

The Sun | January 14, 2001

LAST WEEK, I was appalled to read in one of our local dailies that a college in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) planned to make the largest poster in the country. All this just to gain a mention in the Malaysian book of records. I wonder where the intellectual ingredient of this exercise lies. I can understand it if the feat had at least something to do with the body and mind.

What the students concerned has proposed to spend time on seemed to be but mere theatrics, devoid totally of anything remotely connected with intellectualism.

I have also read about the dismal performance of our students on a recent quiz show, and I think it is time we take our educational institutions to task for the falling standards among our students.

If they can afford to waste their time on frivolities such as the largest poster, what do you expect? I would not have expected UPM to encourage such a project unless the authorities concerned were desirous of scoring political points.

Malaysian institutions of higher learning do not seem to be well regarded overseas, going by a recent high-profile *Asiaweek* report. While there are legitimate weaknesses in the survey, we need to be concerned — rather than provide excuses — as to why our institutions do not appear anywhere at the top. None of them were named among the top 10, or even top 20.

Whatever happened to our quest for academic excellence? Is it to be confined to an institution's mission

statement, which incidentally is often proclaimed in the most grandiose manner? Whether we like it or not, competition is necessary for excellence to emerge at the end of it all.

Some years ago, there were suggestions that a ranking be made of our local universities. Whatever happened to that proposal?

Such a ranking, covering a whole range of criteria could have been carried out by a private organisation if the government machinery is deemed too bureaucratic for it.

To me, two areas need attention. The first is the quality of our teaching staff, and the second involves the quality of the students themselves. While one may not dispute their intellectual capacity at the moment of commencing tertiary studies — local entrance standards being relatively high — the kind of students that we produce are somehow not commensurate with their academic potentials at the point of entry.

Not too long ago, it was revealed that Malaysians featured prominently as achievers — in fact, better than Americans — in a survey conducted in the US. Not surprisingly, this was highlighted in our local dailies. After all, if it can be statistically shown that we are better than the Americans, why not profit from it?

However, I wonder what those figures really mean. Our students may be getting higher scores academically, but are we getting the right kind of graduates? Getting a degree is one thing, but real achievement in life is quite something else. Despite our academic scores, are we known to be innovators and creators?

I have argued that it is the flow of investment into research and development as well as the creation of an atmosphere for the full exercise of the mind that separates institutions. Therefore, it means little to be academically

better than the Americans when they are the ones who are the prime movers in the areas of technology and invention.

Whatever happened to our students? Admittedly, my interaction with them is restricted to my tea-hing days in the 1980s, and the occasional invitation to speak at forums organised by them.

From my experience, I find the Malaysian students at the International Islamic University (IIU) to be the best in terms of articulating their views. They are far more exposed and can be critical at times. In fact, students should be encouraged to exercise their critical minds for this is part and parcel of intellectual development.

University authorities and others often condemn students for getting involved in politics. Such involvement is not entirely a bad thing as long as the students are not being used by political parties. After all, the elections for the student body are itself an exercise in the political process, and sometimes they can be quite intense.

I am not suggesting that they should be encouraged to be political, but rather they should be allowed to exercise their intellectual capacities.

Equally appalling is that our students have e-ained many bad habits formed while in the sc-ool s- em- te learning is the most glaring example. know s- de s- who actually ask notes from their lecturers an- would then judge them depending on whether such no- es are given.

Our students are set on being spoonfed and rarely ask questions or challenge the lecturers. One way to encourage them to do so would be to organise more forum-type discussions among them. On this, I have noticed that when they do organise such functions, they tend to concentrate on the form, rather than the substance.

It is high time that competition is introduced into our university system.

One way of encouraging competition is to introduce ranking among the tertiary institutions. More quiz-type competitions involving university students should also be organised along the lines of the *University Challenge* shown on British television.

Even the introduction of a cleaner campus environment on a competitive basis would be acceptable. After all, a clean surrounding contributes positively to a healthier intellectual ambience.

All this is definitely better than merely demonstrating how patriotic they are — which as far as I am concerned means little. Besides, patriotism cannot be measured by merely parroting the words of others or indulging in vague symbolic shows. Patriotism is a matter of the heart, determined by one's conscience, and not to be made a spectacle of.

Give our top scorers a sense of belonging

The Sun | May 13, 2001

IS EDUCATION part of our rights? Is it a right for Malaysians to have access to education? If it isn't, I think it should. I have always subscribed to the idea that education must be made compulsory for Malaysians, perhaps up to the age of 15 years. More recently, we heard of many top students lamenting their failure to obtain places in our local universities. While one can appreciate the sensitivities involved, it is awfully difficult to tell a student that he or she is unable to pursue a higher education when others could enter at much lower thresholds. The argument is not sustainable and sooner or later, the issue has to be addressed, or it could well become politically untenable.

It is not an easy thing though. One can recognise the necessity of a quota system, but at the same time there is a need to address the plight of the high achievers. The ideal situation is to increase the number of places. This has already been done and universities are already bursting at the seams. Lecturers have to teach more students and their workload is increasing. Facilities are not being built fast enough even as student intakes are fast increasing.

As a short-term measure, the state will have to find places for the high achievers, instead of rejecting them outright. This means that we would need to increase the number of institutions of higher learning.

I have often argued that the standards of our institutions are not being maintained and are in fact declining. There will be those who would question me. However, I would ask them why is it that we do not yet have an independent

quality monitoring body that ranks institutions and acts as a standard watchdog? Universities should support such an idea. We really do not want to hear of institutions that proclaim how good they are while there is little room for alternative voices.

As we are a nation in a hurry, we do not have the luxury of waiting for excellent institutions to flourish. I am not talking of world-class institutions as this has become a meaningless term. I sometimes wonder whether people truly know what this means and what 't take to achieve it. Talk is cheap while quality is expensive and enormous resources are needed. Anyhow, I think we ed to be much more practical and not carry socie al baggage which preven s us from rogressing.

Th basic ingredient for any educational institution is its manpower, its academic staff. If we are unab e to attract Malaysians to enter the academic profess on or we do not have enough qualified people, then we sho d invite foreign academics to teach in our institutions. know that the National University of Singapore (NUS), arguably one of the most prestigious institutions in East sia, has been fairly successful in attracting academics from Europe Australia and elsewhere. Perhaps we need to resort o this al hough it may require additional funds as foreign staff may need o be paid more.

Alternatively, universities need to open p o more part time teaching staff, especially those from the professional sectors. I know this is being done and kudos to the institutions that do not have a phobia about doing this. By having a cross section of lecturers, students are able to benefit more.

There is another possibility in addressing the problem of shortage of places in our local institutions. We have a number of good private institutions that have twining

programmes with some reputable international institutions. Perhaps those that do not make it to our local institutions could be sponsored by the state to attend these institutions and those who are sponsored will obviously have to be tied to the funding agency. By doing this, we maintain the enthusiasm of the high achievers and encourage Malaysians of all communities to work to the best of their ability.

We have argued so much about the future of this country and the importance of the young in determining our achievements. Education is the single most important issue that involves our young today. We cannot afford to alienate any Malaysian as this will have a critical bearing on the attitude of the young in this country. To be rejected when you have achieved outstanding results is a very traumatic experience. Those rejected will automatically have a negative perception of the country and what it stands for.

I do not think we should see this as a zero-sum game. All communities must benefit. I believe that the quota system should remain, but that we should not deprive the high achievers of their rightful places. The Ministry of Education cannot merely talk of the quota system as I do not think people are disputing this. Rather, we need to find alternatives for these people and the Ministry should display a lot more understanding and sympathy and be much more creative. We just have to find the places

Malay students must not take quota for granted

The Sun | June 24, 2001

DURING the Umno presidential opening speech on Thursday, Dr Mahathir Mohamad touched on a number of key issues, ranging from religion, education to general political matters. What particularly caught my attention was his mention of the academic underperformance of the Malays, in particular Malay boys, whom according to recent revelations are doing much worse than the girls, especially in entering the universities.

The Umno president also touched on the small group of Malays who obviously are against the need to stress on the English language. I think Dr Mahathir was absolutely correct in making these two points, as I believe they need to be made, although I am sure some would differ.

Regarding their underperformance the Malay community is taking the government for granted. The subsidy mentality has become entrenched and they think that the government will guarantee them places, even though they may not be up to the mark to enter universities. I think it is appalling that non-Malays with high grades are not able to enter universities while Malays who obtain much lower grades can.

I believe the Malays are equally good and capable of entering the universities in their own right. However, the idea that the government will assist them, without requiring them to make real efforts, has resulted in their losing the competitive spirit which the non-Malays have. The Malays have just lost the ethos of hard work. This is really sad, because they think it is their right to enter university. I

believe the prime minister was correct in making the point that without government intervention, the Malays will not be able to compete.

While I have made the argument that the young do not feel grateful to the government for bringing them development, I believe the quota system is an exception. The Malays must realise that it is the government that has brought them up to their present level and they must not forget this. If they think that they can survive on their own, maybe the government should, at least for one year remove the quota system and allow the Malays to compete in the open to let us judge how much they can achieve without the assistance of the government.

I understand that in one local university, department heads were told to lower their standards of entry in order to make up the unfilled quota for the Malays. I think it is about time that the Malays be told in no uncertain terms that without the assistance of the government they will not be able to enter such institutions.

Whether we like it or not, Umno has helped the Malays, I can sympathise with the prime minister's frustration over these young Malays, including their parents who are supporting the Opposition when it is the government that has been helping them to enter universities in order to give them a head start in life.

I think ministry officials, including authorities at local universities, should be much more transparent in their entry procedures, so that the Malays know how much they are being assisted. I find it hard to understand why the very same students that the government has helped, while at the same time running the risk of unpopularity with the non-Malays, are supporting the Opposition.

As I have argued before, I think the quota system should stay, but I think universities should never lower their

standards in order to accommodate low achievers. This is not helping the Malays in the medium or longer term. I sometimes put the blame on the universities themselves for perpetuating the situation. University lectures should not be pressured by their deans or heads of department to lower their standards in order to accommodate failures. I think those who give in to this are betraying the Malays, for it will only encourage mediocrity. It is time that the universities embraced meritocracy.

The second point is over the need to raise the importance of the English language and how a small group of ultra-Malays have hindered the Malays themselves from making headway in the use of English. I find it ironic that this small group, who probably speak good English and were educated abroad are depriving young Malays of the advantages of English literacy. Why does it have to be a zero-sum game? It does not mean that the Malay language is going to suffer. The Malays need to be encouraged in the use of English, especially in the rural areas. It is unfortunate that the teachers themselves are sometimes not motivated to speak the language, let alone teach it. Again, why should we be so afraid of the impact of the English language on the Malay language? Are the Malays so weak that we are at risk of losing our mother tongue to English? Surely not!

I think we should be brave enough and join the prime minister in stressing the usage of the English language among the Malays. I think there is so much hypocrisy out there. Those who champion the Malay language and criticise the emphasis on English would grab the chance to go abroad and speak in English.

I know that many Malays would agree with the prime minister on these two points, among others. Don't allow the prime minister to stand alone on these issues. That will be a disservice to the community.

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Where the buck might stop over varsity troubles

The Sun | July 8, 2001

THE DESTRUCTION of Universiti Malaya's Dewan Tunku Canselor (Tunku Chancellor hall) caught many by surprise. Particularly spectacular was the speculation that followed. The most sensible statement was from the police when they asked people to wait until the investigation is over. However, I thought it was a bad reflection on the part of Puteri Umno (Umno's wing for young women) when it demanded the resignation of the university's vice-chancellor.

While the head of an institution should be accountable for his organisation, demanding for his resignation is not appropriate. Puteri Umno was too hasty. If a group of prisoners were to escape from a prison, does that mean that the director of prisons should resign, or just the chief warden of that particular prison?

Where does the buck stop? In the university's case, is it the vice-chancellor, the head of higher education at the Ministry of Education or even the minister himself?

The Umno Youth Chief mentioned the other day that the vice-chancellor was responsible for the emergence of an anti-establishment trend in the university. Clearly he is out of touch with a society that has become increasingly critical. With education and globalisation, our society is becoming more sophisticated and more curious.

To blame the vice-chancellor for this trend in the university is to bark up the wrong tree. I believe this is part of a larger problem. Even the Umno Youth head will agree that the party has lost a sizeable number of Malay supporters. Does he then blame himself or the higher

echelons? Surely not, for the problem goes beyond mere personalities.

I think Puteri Umno has to act more responsibly, and be consistent in its stand. If they still demand the vice-chancellor's resignation, then they should also call for the resignation of many others; if similar catastrophes occur in the future. Perhaps the fact that the vice-chancellor is not a political figure gave Puteri Umno the courage to ask for his resignation. They would probably have remained silent if a politician was involved.

When the concept of a Puteri Umno was first mooted, I thought it was a good move as there was a need to get the support of younger Malay women. However, as a new entity, it must project the right kind of image, one that would reflect the changing times. They must be seen to be a thinking lot, and not act on impulse.

Clearly, it appears that there is an undercurrent of anti-establishment elements in our local universities. Though there is no concrete evidence, it does seem to involve Malay students. It is ironic that this is the group that the government has helped. The university authorities have bent the entrance standards to accommodate them and yet they do not appear to appreciate this. If one could just let the government remove this privilege and see if they can stand on their own. We must nip this worrying trend in the bud before it blows out of proportion.

I suspect the influence on the students comes from Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia) and its inculcation of hatred against the authorities. It is not easy to combat this; I do not subscribe to the use of force against force. Anyhow, I sometimes wonder whether there are meaningful dialogues between the university authorities and the students.

There may be dialogue sessions, but how many of the students' grievances were noted and acted upon? We recently saw a small skirmish in UM where angry students tried to get in after the deadline to register lapsed. Why should the university authorities be so rigid?

I understand that recently the university introduced singing of the university song before the start of faculty meetings. I find this rather comical for I cannot imagine that by merely singing songs, one can become loyal and patriotic.

This is what I always mean by applying old methods in a new environment. It is most unfortunate that in the 21st century, UM chooses a gimmick which is a poor reflection of its image as being at the forefront of change and innovation.

I also understand there is a new emphasis on dress code in the university. Is this really important? Informality is becoming a symbol of the 21st century. I think formal attire is rather inappropriate in a university, although there will be occasions when dressing up is required.

I began by saying that the fire at the Dewan Tunku Canselor should not be blamed on the vice-chancellor and that the calls for his resignation were misplaced. I also think that the universities must be brought to task on their methodology of putting the concept of education and the quest for academic excellence at their core. They should not practise outmoded methods that clearly do not work on a student body which is becoming more vocal as a reflection of the wider trend in our society.

Setting the stage for Malay scholars to excel

The Sun | August 5, 2001

THE DEBATE over meritocracy has indeed heat up. With the Cabinet's approval, it would appear that university entrance would now be based on merit, rather than on other considerations. The quota system should perhaps be maintained, but on a diminishing scale via an annual percentage reduction until it ultimately becomes zero.

My concern is over the performance of Malays in universities and not so much on the issue of their entry. Here, I think the university authorities should own up to the past and even current mistakes of giving the impression that mediocre students are allowed to get through their courses. With this in their minds, some students may feel that by being Malays, it is their right to pass their examinations.

Why is this so? One possible reason is that most of their lecturers are Malays and are inclined to be lenient towards them, instead of judging them on their actual academic performance. I believe such lecturers have perpetuated this deterioration in the performance of Malay students. I do not blame the students themselves as they probably got the impression from their seniors of the relative ease in passing the examinations.

I also understand that the university conducts special motivational and tuition classes for Malays only. This is wrong for it segregates students ethnically. It also indicates that the problem of underperformance of Malay students has been known to the authorities for quite a while. Thus over the years, not only have the Malays been given an

easier route to enter the universities; they have also been pampered throughout their studies.

As a Malay, I think it is not in the community's interest to perpetuate this situation. While I still think that the Malays are disadvantaged, we must begin the process of rolling back these privileges. In fact, the subsidy mentality has already become entrenched among the Malays. It is also embarrassing that the Malays, after thirty years of the New Economic Policy (NEP, now the National Development Policy), still require concessions in entering universities and in passing examinations.

What baffles me is where the good Malay students are? When results are published, we find some Malays scoring impressive results. Somehow, there is a feeling that there is still a debate within official circles as to what exactly needs to be done to ensure more standardised achievements among the Malays.

As for the preponderance of Malay students involved in politics, is it because they know that they can sail through their examinations with a minimum of studying? Are the lecturers themselves sympathetic to the involvement of their students in opposition politics? Such students should be made aware that without the government's assistance, they could not even dream of the tertiary education that they are receiving.

This brings me to another point: quality versus quantity. Over the decades we have focused on quantity, on catching up with the other communities. The time has come for us to shift our emphasis to quality. Today, we talk of the knowledge economy. Surely, this indicates the need to stress intellectual ability. This brings us to our local universities, which I believe have the wherewithal to become great institutions. But this is clearly not happening. In Universiti Malaya, for instance, non-academic activities are

introduced, such as singing and the wearing of *baju Melayu* (Malay dress) on Fridays that are supposed to enhance the sense of 'belonging'. Whatever happened to academic excellence, research and publications? Are our universities producing books that are published abroad, or are they mere translations of Western writers?

While we could place some blame on the students, I would like to take the university authorities to task for the prevailing situation. The special classes for Malays must stop. The Malays have what it takes to be intellectually strong. Too much intervention has hindered our competitive ethos, much to our disadvantage. For academic excellence to emerge, we must institute a well-publicised ranking system. By doing so, we will create some degree of competition among our institutions. If such a ranking is introduced, it must be based on research and publications. In this regard, I dare say that we are not well regarded in the region, let alone in the world.

There are some very good academics in our midst who are well respected in their fields. Sadly, this minority is a frustrated group and there is a definite brain drain. We need to start a conscious effort to bring back academic excellence to our universities, assuming it is there in the first place. Some day, hopefully, we will reach a stage where we can be proud of the high standards that we have set for our institutions, eliminating the mediocrity currently prevailing.

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Pressure-cooker education overdue for a rethink

The Sun | August 26, 2001

THERE was this news item a few days ago about a 10-year-old girl in Singapore who committed suicide because she failed in her exams. This brings to mind the kinds of pressure that our young are facing today—mainly from their parents—in terms of performance in their examinations.

While we should all strive for excellence, there are many definitions of this. Malaysia, and I believe, Singapore too, are a little too obsessed with examinations. Our young today have to attend private tuition; even during their primary school days. What does this say about our system and us for that matter?

Perhaps two things. One is that our Malaysian school system is inadequate. This seems to be acknowledged even by the managers of the system themselves. Not only are teachers engaged in giving private tuition, even the officials of the Ministry of Education are sending their own children for such tuition. I believe the notion of sending children for private tuition is quite alien in many countries abroad. I actually attended a comprehensive school in the UK and recalled that tuition was a non-existent concept then. I am sure the situation has not changed much.

Secondly, we have been emphasising too much on the academic achievement of our children without looking at their emotional development. It could well be that we are placing too much pressure on them while at the same time hardly listening to them; nor do we consider their views

when we make them do things. Yes, parents — speaking as one myself — are always in a dilemma.

On the one hand, we know that without passing examinations, our children stand little chance of securing decent employment when they grow up. On the other, we know that passing examinations is no guarantee that they will grow up to be good and happy, which is what we really desire for them. Sometimes, I wonder if parents really know what they want of their children. I think the bottom line is that we want their eternal love. Sadly, how many of us are willing to admit that this is what we really covet from them? We pressure them and sometimes we lose their love in the process. We want them to be good, yet we do not listen to them when they have problems. Sometimes, we hide behind illusions as a way of delegating our responsibilities. Often, we hear ourselves saying, "I spend so much money on you, yet you do not listen to me."

We use money to compensate for time not spent with our children. We pack them off for tuition and pay for this and that. But do we ever give them some of our time, a commodity which they crave for?

We should spare a thought and better still, do something about it. We should start pressuring them less academically and prepare them for a life which, as we all know, pays little heed to academic qualifications.

We know there is perhaps no correlation between qualifications and being good. Being successful is not in itself a guarantee of happiness or of a child's love for his or her parents.

We know of many cases where the children are successful, yet the parents are neglected; or when the process which made them successful has caused strains in their relationships. Success had been achieved at the expense of familial love.

It is time for us to rethink where we are heading as a family, and as a society. Are we putting too much attention upon studying? And even that, I would imagine, is more rote-learning than the true pursuit of knowledge—one reason perhaps why Malaysians may be high achievers, but seldom high performers. By this, I mean we may not be too creative or innovative, and invariably lose out to others whose education systems are less rigid.

Moving on to a somewhat different topic I observed that our society is witnessing a deterioration in moral values, and we need to seek out the reasons for this, and I am convinced of a number of points. Dr Mahathir Mohamad said recently that there is something fundamentally wrong in the way we teach morals and religion in our school system. Can these really be taught in the first place? Are our teaching methods mere exercises, utterly devoid of reality?

If we tell our children all the do's and don'ts—as if life is all black and white—little wonder then that whatever may enter their noggins would merely leave the next minute. Life is full of grey areas; this is what we need to discuss with our young, not to dictate to them about rights and wrongs. Furthermore, the persons entrusted with teaching such subjects and the children's parents may not see all things eye to eye. Life is full of contradictions and is not always easy to understand, explain or interpret. With this in view I think we should have a major re-examination of this very critical issue. This is an urgent task confronting us in our country's education system.

Be thankful, but get ready to stand on your own two feet

The Sun | October 28, 2001

EACH TIME the school examinations begin, my daughter would tense up. Her tension would build up to a peak when the results are out. She would then tell me that she came out fifth or sixth in the class—which, I would think, is not too bad. But what she meant—as she would subsequently explain is fifth or sixth counting backwards from the end.

This has always put me in a quandary. On the one hand, I have no problem with her results for I know she is a highly intelligent and talented girl. But, on the other hand, for me to tell her that her result is okay would encourage her to continue to neglect her studies, and in a system where results determine one's future, obviously she has to meet the grades.

I believe, rightly or wrongly, that she inherited this trait from me. I, too, did badly in school. Academically I peaked at Standard Six. After that, my scholastic achievements went downhill all the way. The only school prize I ever got in my life was in Standard Six, and even that was for just one subject. I cannot recall ever being among the top 10 in my class, so much for my academic career.

For reasons of my own, I do not subscribe to the idea of sending my daughter for private tuition to supplement the formal teaching she gets in school.

I admit that as a parent I belong to a minority group. Most concerned parents think that they should send their children for extracurricular education. This is clearly the norm today.

My attitude may well have brought about my daughter's dismal performance at school. But what is important is that she lives a life free from pressure, and she enjoys her free time at home with her grandmother. This, I think, is equally important.

Currently, there is just too much emphasis being placed on academic qualifications, which seem to be the only criterion for entry into higher educational institutions.

One still needs top grades and high achievements to enter the likes of Harvard and Yale. (Incidentally, graduating from any of these top institutions is no real indication of one's mental brilliance, or lack thereof. Such, however, is life.)

This brings me to my topic of discussion, which has to do with the recent decision by the authorities concerned that university entrance in Malaysia shall be based on merit. This is a good start as the system will now be much more transparent, and I sincerely hope its implementation will allow this transparency to come into play. It should all boil down to the dictum that high achievers will be assured of places in our institutions of higher learning.

I have consistently argued that with government assistance, the Malay community has greatly benefited, sometimes at the expense of the others. A quota system, however, invariably breeds a degree of unfairness, if not injustice. The Malays have benefited from it, and nobody can dispute this. I, too, benefited from it and am not ashamed to admit it. After all, without its support, I would not be where I am today.

After some thirty years or so of the New Economic Policy (NEP, now the National Development Policy), the Malay community has had more than a leg up in many fields. Today, the community can stand proud for it can

boast of a large number of graduates, professionals and high achievers.

However, I believe the time may well be ripe for them to stand on their own now. Or are they still at the stage where they still require crutches? Surely they cannot be babes forever, continuing to crawl and refusing to learn to walk till the end of time. The process of transition, however, must be gradual.

I believe that the Malays can be equal to—if not better than—any other ethnic groups. The problem lies in the “subsidy mentality” which has inadvertently made them complacent.

As we embark, therefore, on this new system of university entry, I urge all Malays to view it as a positive step that will make the community stronger and more competitive. We must remember that we have benefited much from the government’s policy. Even if one may not be happy with a particular aspect of it, in general the NEP has delivered the goods to the community and to the nation.

As parents, we would like to see our children display filial gratitude. There is nothing wrong with this, especially during the times when it matters most. Likewise, I think it is reasonable that when the government needs our support, especially during elections, we should heed its call. Our failure to do so means we are throwing away all that we cherish, and are allowing extreme forces to take over and destroy this country of ours.

Attitudinal change in electorate a tribute to nation's growth success

New Straits Times | November 15, 1999

IT SEEMS CLEAR that the candidates to be chosen to stand for the coming general election will be chosen based on their performance and credibility. This will certainly be a winning formula, as the electorates these days are far more critical and their expectations far higher. This attitudinal change is itself a tribute to the country's success in development.

When a society's expectation of their representatives increases, this is a sure sign of political maturity and that the country is heading in the right direction.

Power is an interesting concept. In the context of democracy, there is what is often referred to as the paradox of power. Essentially, in higher forms of democracy, the more power you have, the more you have to share and to consult.

Within the context of being a people's representative one needs to be much more accountable and representative of one's constituency. Gone are the days when members of parliament (MPs) could remain aloof and be detached from his or her constituency. They cannot only surface and appear to be everywhere only once every five years. Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has made it clear that the candidacy for this general election is based on suitability and performance over the last few years.

Representatives for tomorrow will need to be humble and be seen as the servant rather than the master. The traditional notion of power and its employment is changing. As this changes, so too will the people's perception.

Sometimes, the people place the representatives on a pedestal, giving them a higher elevation than they deserve. With time, representatives can no longer expect such treatment from the people.

This is not necessarily a negative development, but reflects a higher degree of sophistication of the population and must be attributed to the prevailing open system that we all enjoy.

There are many aspects to this humbling process, and this includes the behavioural aspect. Representatives will need to mingle with the ordinary folks more often, for example, by taking public transport and go through what most of the population undergo on a daily basis.

They should reflect, at least in form, the things they are trying to promote. For instance, it is most unfortunate that when officials preside over functions to promote local products, they parade about with imported products, including arriving at the function in imported cars.

There is much to be learnt from the Japanese, who are very loyal to their products. It is unthinkable for a Japanese representative, unless for a specific purpose, to be seen in a non-Japanese car.

The prime minister has always been the champion of local products. He firmly believes in Malaysia, even though some of his officials may not do so.

He is really a paragon of what a Malaysian should be that of being proud to be a Malaysian, and this is done through example and in practice and not mere rhetoric.

In this respect, representatives and officials alike must follow the prime minister. It is believed that this humbling process has already started and we could well see the positive outcome soon.

It is hoped that after the general elections, the new representatives would form a new generation of politicians

that would see themselves as truly representing the people who have entrusted their future and hopes on them.

Sometimes, the representatives feel that they could hide behind the federal or state governments and are not too concerned with the day-to-day problems of their constituency. This obviously will need to be changed.

It is axiomatic that the Malaysian society is changing rapidly and this is the result of our economic transformation and modernity. Our standard of living has seen tremendous improvement. Many Malaysians have never experienced violence or poverty. This must be regarded as sacrosanct and any groups that threaten this must be rejected and dealt with.

However, what most would like to see is a much more responsive government. The signs of change are already there and the government is already listening. A good case in point is over the bank mergers.

There were various groups that were clearly unhappy over the initial decision, for a variety of reasons. The prime minister came out and overturned this policy, much to the relief and happiness of these groups. This is an illustration of a listening government.

I am confident that the traditional notion of power will change with the times and that the paradox of power will come to be the norm and be accepted as the way of doing things. This, after all, will be the way forward.

New ways to bridge the Umno-Malay gap

New Straits Times | December 13, 1999

DEMOCRACY is alive and kicking in Malaysia. The fact that there are losers and winners in elections only reinforces this. The 10th general election was a great victory for the Barisan Nasional (BN, National Coalition), but was a setback for its backbone party, the United Malay National Organisation (Umno).

I have described this as a defeat in victory because never before in the country's political history have so many Umno Cabinet ministers, deputy ministers and chief ministers lost in the elections. Across the board, it was clear that the majority of the Malays voted against the ruling party. Ironically, it was the non-Malays who helped Umno candidates.

If one were to do a critical analysis of the results, especially looking at the racial composition of the constituencies, those with a huge Malay majority in their areas were either defeated or their majorities dramatically reduced. No matter how we look at it, clearly, the Malays are generally unhappy or dissatisfied with the government, and, in particular, with Umno. There are both push and pull factors.

Over the years, as Umno has come to be identified with the image of big businesses and mega-projects, the average Malay can no longer relate that easily to the party. To the Malays in general, bringing huge development is no longer enough, as they would like to see their leaders more often, and to champion their rights.

Sometimes, our general view is so clouded by the rapid development in the cities and of the huge infrastructure that we tend to neglect, or sometimes pretend that there are no pockets of Malays who still live below the poverty line. Yes one could argue that poverty occurs even in the West.

The Malays are also unhappy over the frequent in-fighting that occurs within Umno, causing the party to spend too much time away from its original objective of championing for the Malays.

The pull factors must be the opposition parties, especially Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia). Their candidates and the party machinery were seen in their areas months before the election. Unfortunately, Umno and BN were always a little delayed in making their presence felt.

PAS fully exploited the situation and was there to pick up the so-called Malay silent majority. There were a few things during the campaign that turned away some Malays from the BN. The advertisements in the local media could have helped to convince the non-Malays, but had the opposite effect on the Malays. The PAS machinery was clearly more effective than most gave them credit for. They were better prepared. Imagine the next time around when they would have much more resources at their disposal, now that they control the oil-rich state of Terengganu.

Clearly, corrective steps need to be taken. If not, the real danger will come in the next election, when the country could be divided into what was once the federated and the unfederated Malay states. The Opposition rules the latter. All is not lost, however, as this election is a warning to Umno: the Malay votes were against Umno, not in support of PAS.

Umno should avoid pointing fingers at each other for their failure, as this would only bring about further

dissension within the party. What is required is for the members to be sincere in their analysis. We should call a spade a spade and not pretend that everything is fine when they are not.

To begin with, there must be a change in the way we see the Malays. We should give credit to the mental development of the Malays. The Malays are no longer the pliant community that accepts everything the government says at face value. Due to the success of our education system and economic development, the Malay community has progressed and this is indeed a positive sign.

I am proud that the Malays now are no longer the Malays of the 1960s or 1970s, whereby they had tended to accept their fate. Today, they can think and express their thoughts. This shift in the Malay mindset must be recognised. For instance, the media must handle the issues in a much more sophisticated and subtle manner. More importantly, people would like to see more admission of fault, rather than that of giving excuses. More often than not, the government does not want to admit when its policies have not been effective and mistakes were made. Overt displays of propaganda merely put people off. This is a sure sign that we are moving towards a developed society. Ironically, this is brought about by the successes of the government.

A credibility gap exists today between Umno and the Malays. It must be pointed out that the popularity vote has been reduced to only 56 per cent. We must employ new methodologies and new approaches in order to address this gap. So far, we have seen the use of old methodology in a new environment. We must remember that in a fast changing world, where there is a pluralism of ideas and sources of information, one must change with the times, if not we will be left behind.

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MPs must work hard in Parliament

New Straits Times | December 27, 1999

LATELY, there has been much public discussion on the role of members of parliament (MPs), in particular, regarding their attendance in Parliament. It is laudable that the prime minister himself has highlighted this issue, saying that their performance will be monitored throughout their tenure. It is most unfortunate that the new MPs do not see the importance of attending sessions.

Who are these people who have been selected and subsequently voted the privilege of serving the people?

How do we ensure that our MPs are serving the interests of the public? Obviously attending Parliament is one way although the larger picture is attending to the needs of the people on a daily basis.

What concerns us today is the MPs' accountability in Parliament. There are several suggestions.

To begin with, there is a need to print the attendance of the previous seating on a daily basis during parliamentary sessions. This way, we could be specific as to who has not been attending. So far, the people are in the dark as to their attendance.

For the sake of public accountability, the media can devote space for this purpose.

Secondly, there must be a mechanism in place by which the performance of the MPs can be evaluated in a more systematic way.

I suggest this mechanism be handled at two levels, firstly, at the national and parliamentary level and, secondly,

at the constituency level with a committee of leading members from the area.

The committees can play an important role in determining whether an MP has performed well and whether he or she should still stand in the next elections.

Here, the party has a role to play in selecting the candidates and can avoid the kind of unhappiness, and at times bitterness, when candidates not favoured by the division get to stand for elections.

Who knows better about the candidates than the constituency's people themselves? The selection could take place a year before the polls, giving them ample time to work and get themselves familiarised with the people, and the people with the candidates.

As part of getting the MPs involved, Parliament should consider the setting up parliamentary committees where MPs can be involved in a much more meaningful manner.

The problem is MPs today pick and choose and therefore, more often than not, find their own justification not to attend.

Parliamentary committees could be based on economics, foreign affairs, social issues or even technology.

These committees could work at their own momentum and could assist in generating public interest. Each committee can have a chairman and deputy chairman and could bring in outside expertise to assist in the deliberations.

By doing so, the committees could play an effective role in the whole decision-making process. These parliamentary committees can be an ongoing affair and not tied to any Bills, thereby making them separate from the committee stage of the passing of Bills.

There are many things that did not work out during the last elections, especially for Umno.

To a large extent, Umno went to the polls with a "full stomach", while the Opposition, especially Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia), was hungry.

Now that it is over and Barisan Nasional (BN, National Coalition) has maintained itself, surely, we should put pressure on MPs, especially those belonging to the ruling party, to make them perform.

For the sake of the future of this country, we must not allow them to be complacent. This is why, I believe, we must speak out against MPs as well as state assemblymen who are not performing.

Based on the results, the rivalry will be between Umno and PAS. Umno must outperform PAS. PAS is even hungrier today, having won an additional state and more seats.

Today, PAS is considered an extreme party. What if PAS decides to be more moderate and attracts the more urban and liberal Malays?

The time has come for Umno to act and act fast, for the sake of the Malays, for the BN and for all Malaysians. To begin with, there must be less in-fighting within Umno for this has brought much destruction.

Umno should sort out its long-term successions plans and this is accepted by all. The in-fighting will only benefit the Opposition and even alienate the general public as members will be diverted and, like all contests, unfortunately, there will be winners and losers.

The election results, as many have argued, are all too obvious for Umno. It has provided the party with a golden opportunity to restructure and to reengineer itself. It has to be done internally and collectively.

The Umno president is the only person who can initiate these changes rapidly and could well provide the guiding

light. He is the only person in Umno who has the stature and clout to play such a role.

Many would like to see a more united and collective stand, especially among the top Umno leadership. If there are no party reforms, this could lead to ordinary members being frustrated. They will lose their interest in the well-being of the party, which has for so long defended and championed the rights of the Malay community. This can make the situation less certain, less manageable and unstable. The choice, then, will be obvious.

Let us now move on to serious work

New Straits Times | January 10, 2000

IT APPEARS THAT there will be no contest for the two top Umno positions. There will be those who would lament over this decision, while others would support such a move. Whatever the argument is, it seems quite clear that there is a bigger picture at stake and should take precedent over party politics. This has to do with the outcome of the last elections.

There is now an emerging consensus that while the elections produced the desired results, it did, however, revealed that the Malays have awakened and are willing to vote against the government. Many reasons account for this, *inter alia*, the feeling of being neglected as well as generally being dissatisfied over the ill-treatment of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim.

This is not to say that they support the former deputy prime minister, but rather it is a humanitarian issue. Be that as it may, Umno has a greater agenda than merely about contests at the top positions. Umno only has four years to regain the trust and confidence of the Malay community.

Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia) is doing its utmost to attract the disgruntled Malays and is doing fairly well so far. Indications show that PAS is pushing for more people-centred and moderate policies, which are popular. This popularity could well spread rapidly over the neighbouring states of Kelantan and Terengganu. There is much to be done by Umno.

Party squabbling in Umno is preferred by PAS.

It seems clear that the prime minister is seriously putting into place the process of transition of power. This is

definitely the ultimate sign of a benevolent leader. Many leaders have refused to retire, resulting in them being forced to do so. Britain's Margaret Thatcher and Indonesia's Suharto are recent examples. By doing so, Dr Mahathir Mohamad will secure a special place in the annals of the country's political history as a leader who thinks of and prepares for the future.

To a large extent, Dr Mahathir is being magnanimous. He has already stated that this will be his last term and what he is presently doing is not to protect himself but rather his successor, ensuring a smooth transfer of power when the time comes. This is most noble and contains the signs of a great leadership. History has a catalogue of leaders who, having stayed in power for decades, refused to entertain the ideas of having a successor. The prime minister has risen to the occasion yet again.

The path is clear for Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to consolidate his position and when the time comes, to be elevated to the helm of Malaysian politics. It is also gratifying to see the sense of unity and support shown by the top Umno leadership, in particular, the other current vice-president, Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, who came out in support of the prime minister's recommendation and that Abdullah's ascension to the position of deputy president be uncontested.

Himself being a potential candidate for the top position, Najib's stand is most commendable. His support for Abdullah should vindicate Najib from the earlier false perception that he poses a potential threat. He has been seen as a team player and has always been loyal to the party. As such, he has a positive role to play and his leadership qualities should ensure him a higher office in the near future.

Abdullah is indeed the best person to succeed Dr Mahathir. Personally, not only is he an affable person, he is

also seen as a gentleman. He is well liked and is someone who can reach out to the people, irrespective of race or creed. This strong quality is today a *sine qua non* in Malaysian politics.

Most important of all, Abdullah is a consensus-builder and is accepted by most sectors of society. As someone who could build bridges across rivers of dissension and discontentment, and over a divided community, Abdullah is the best man for the job.

There appears to be an interesting historical trend among our top leaders.

Tunku Abdul Rahman was seen as a leader who, although he achieved independence for the country, was quite contented to rule the country as it was.

Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, a hardworking and strong-willed leader, replaced him. Over a short period of time, he brought about many changes to the economic and political landscape of the country. He also regained stability for the country. He was indeed a great reformer.

Razak's successor, Tun Hussein Onn, brought a period of consolidation to the country, continuing the good foundation laid down by Razak.

Dr Mahathir's period saw the phenomenal growth of Malaysia, with a new sense of achievement breaking the mental barrier among Malaysians. It has been one roller coaster of achievements and rapid economic triumph.

Abdullah will certainly provide a much-needed period of consolidation, continuing the excellent track record of Dr Mahathir. The prime minister is actually overseeing Abdullah, something that is most responsible. As it has often been said, the prime minister's job is not easy and most do not get the chance of being an apprentice first.

In the case of Abdullah this is exactly what is happening. Despite our difficulties and sometimes petty squabbling, the

time has come for us to rally behind Abdullah and show that what is important is consensus building and unity for there is a bigger threat looming.

With an experienced and dedicated team, imbued with a strong sense of professionalism, he will be the leader who can breach the gap and lacunae that exists in the country.

We are today beginning to see the emergence of some semblance of an advanced citizenship, where the people are not only aware of their rights, but are also in a position to demand for them. And this must be accepted as a positive development and the realities of a rapidly developing country. The future holds enormous challenges.

The credibility gap must be narrowed and the government must appear to be a government that listens. There must be more bottom-up participation and pluralism in decision-making processes.

Malaysia is on the threshold of a new era. However, before we enter it, we need to take stock of where we are and where we are heading.

Like most countries that have experienced rapid economic and societal transformation, Malaysia has had its fair share of the downside. There are marginalised groups in this country and somehow their plight has been neglected.

We must recognise that there are serious problems out there. We must not deny this nor fool ourselves. We must cease to be engaged in a feel-good exercise, when the reality is something else.

We are now in the 21st century and the celebrations are over. Most Malaysians would want to see a smooth and stable transition. We have already achieved this and the challenge is to ensure continuity.

Suggestions to revitalise Umno

The Sun | August 6, 2000

RECENTLY, Umno, once again, talked about amending its constitution, presumably to improve the party. This follows a lapse of some six months after the general election, where clearly, the party has lost the support of the majority of the community it represents.

Interestingly, immediately after the elections, there were various calls for reflection on the results, and even for party reforms to be undertaken.

The recent announcement of the convening of a special assembly to look at constitutional amendments is the latest party initiative.

For what they are worth, the following are some unsolicited proposals, which are meant to reflect the changing political reality.

What is required is a new methodology for a new environment. It must be pointed out that, while flexibility is always an important element of planning things must be institutionalised so that members are clear on the procedure and that things are not being determined by the whims of personalities, at whatever level.

The first issue is to institutionalise parliamentary and rejuvenation of the party hierarchy. In this respect, there is a need to place a limitation on the duration of any one person holding any position, and this should start at the Umno supreme council level. Whether it is for a maximum of three or five terms, obviously this should be left to members. However, the principle of limitation should be accepted.

This means that any person from the president, deputy president, three vice-presidents, head of Umno Youth and Wanita Umno (Umno Women), to the supreme council members, can only remain in one position for a limited time. When the time comes, he or she could either step down or contest for higher office. In this way, there will be a greater degree of expectation and contest. It will encourage greater competition and hence better performance. This will also give much hope for younger members who need not wait for incumbents to leave, not knowing when there will be a vacancy.

One suspects that one of the reasons for the lack of enthusiasm for party members to remain committed to the ideals of the party is the lack of incentives, essentially the prospects for higher office. Once this principle is accepted, it should apply to all positions, without exception.

Following from this is the need for all party members to take part directly in party elections. All positions should be directly elected by party members, thereby raising the stakes of members. This empowerment of members could well bring back some meaning to being an Umno member. Although this is no guarantee, it could be argued that this could eliminate money politics, as buying votes would require too big a sum of money.

During the last party elections, voting delegates numbered less than two thousand. The target audience is smaller, thereby making money politics that much more feasible. Obviously, if this is considered, there must be greater scrutiny of the acceptance of members.

The process should be like the Election Commission's registration of voters. This would also mean that aspirants should be working harder for the benefit of the party and the overall membership instead of just the elite within the party, that is, the delegates to the assembly.

Concomitant with this is the urgent need to strengthen the party machinery, bringing in professionalism into its organisation. To begin with, the secretary-general's position should be a full-time job and should be decoupled from a Cabinet position. Given the daunting tasks, it is difficult to expect the occupant of this position to be equally dedicated to the party and the designated ministry at the same time.

The party should improve its organisation, both in membership and information services. There have been many previous discussions on the need to set up a strong research arm of the party. Unfortunately, it remains only talk. A modern party requires a serious professional research body within its wings.

Some believe one of the reasons why such an idea has not materialised is the fear of the building of a mini empire within the party. After all, information is power. In the new environment, one should stress professionalism, rather than mere loyalty to personality.

Loyalty should always be to the institutions, or to the notion of struggle and to ideals, and certainly not to personality. Leaders should be much more circumspect of people who pledge their loyalty to them. One wonders where such loyalty will shift when that person is no longer holding high office.

Apart from the need to set up a party think-tank, it is about time Umno establishes an effective complaints bureau. The bureau that is set up must not be mere cosmetics, but has to be results-oriented. Where is Umno's equivalent to MCA's Michael Chong? Even Malays seek the assistance of the MCA in solving their problems.

There is a need to institutionalise the selection of election candidates, whether for parliamentary or state seats. The process of selection must be made much more transparent and fairer to all, rather than one that appears to

perpetuate the patronage system. The principle to establish is that the constituency party is in the best position to select the candidate.

Potential candidates from the constituency should be open and they should go through an elaborate process of selection, maybe ranging from various tests, as well as interviews to be conducted by professionals as well as a cross section of members of the constituency party. Any qualified party member should be eligible and the process should be competitive, so that the best candidate will be chosen to represent the party.

This process should start way ahead, perhaps even up to two years before the possible dates for elections. Incumbents should also be part of this process, and he or she particularly has to prove his or her worth. This would give ample time for the chosen candidate to get to know the constituency and work towards victory. This process must be institutionalised.

I expect the above suggestions to be heavily criticised by some quarters. Criticism should be encouraged and the suggestions debated. After all, they are meant to provoke the thinking process.

However, do not criticise the message bearer. It is often the case that the messenger becomes a victim and if such a situation exists, then this could well be a harbinger for what is to come. My suggestions are made with the best of intentions. I would like to see the continuation of the Barisan Nasional, in particular Umno, in power for a long time to come. Therefore, it is sometimes frustrating to see that the party appears not to heed the obvious signs from the ground, which is fast changing.

All institutions must undergo some degree of reinvention. They need to make the necessary adjustments in order to remain relevant in a new environment, one that is

positive, dynamic and much more prosperous — the results of the successful management of the country by a very able leadership.

Umno Youth must shed its elitist image

The Sun | March 4, 2001

A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO, one of the Umno vice-presidents, Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, commented in a Malay daily that Umno Youth needs to go down to the ground more often. Most readers would certainly agree with his comments. Many have come to view Umno as an elitist organisation and it should therefore take steps to shed that image.

However, I was surprised when the following day, some Umno members countered Najib's remark by saying that the organisation was far more elitist during his tenure as its head. I was taken aback by the comment. The fact that Umno Youth has had to defend itself goes to show how it has lost its touch. I would have thought the best recourse was to accept that they have a perception problem and adopt a more people-oriented approach. After all, this was admitted to by no less than its present head and Najib was only supporting his view. The defensive stance only serves to vindicate Najib.

The last five years or so have seen a major transformation in Malaysian society, especially of its young. Some believe this has been brought about by the rapid economic development the country has witnessed since the late 1980s. A whole generation of Malaysians has been brought up in what could be regarded as a prosperous Malaysia. Today's young did not even have to endure black and white television.

Nevertheless, they tend to be less elitist, a result of the narrowing gap between the rich and the poor. To compare

today's scenario with yesterday's, as Umno Youth had done, only illustrates the organisation's inability to see the political and societal realities of the day.

I have often been asked what the expectations of today's young are. One is inclined to be sympathetic to their views. In the first place, with their access to better education and the world, the young are more exposed to the changes taking place elsewhere. Therefore, they tend to form their own independent views and are able to express themselves and to be heard.

They are also less cohesive and more individualistic when compared to the middle-aged or 1969 generation, who have a living memory of the racial riots. As individuals, they would like the government to reflect a little of their thinking and would appreciate being heard themselves. I believe all they want is space and the right to voice their opinions. They are less rigid, certainly less protocol-minded and very informal. To a large extent, they reflect some elements of the new economy, which is more innovative and creative-based.

In this regard, there is an obvious gap between Umno Youth and the youths whom it is supposed to represent. To begin with, it is about time that it sheds its 'white-shirt' image, which is supposed to provide a degree of identity and uniformity. The young cannot relate to that sort of uniformity and its impression of a single face, which runs against the grain for them. I know there will be conservative elements that will criticise my suggestions.

Let us just ponder over what the young wants today. Umno Youth has little choice but to listen to them without preconceived ideas. The notion that, "I know, and therefore listen" is outmoded. I often say that I too have lost touch with the young and long for the days when I was teaching in the university where I could meet with them all the time.

Najib's suggestion that Umno Youth go down to the grassroots more frequently must be accepted with good grace. One should also take a look at the method and approach to use when going down to the ground. It would be counter-productive if leaders of Umno Youth only visit these places and yet keep to their old ways. They should be more informal and less concerned with time-consuming ceremonies. Even the functions must be much more people oriented, minus all the red-carpet razzmatazz. There should be no barrier between politicians and the people. Being humble without being weak must be a common practice. The young are obviously raw and in most cases, dynamic and hungry. They are also there for the taking in the sense that they need guidance and advice. However, the characteristics of the young today are nothing new as we are all the same. After all, the radicals of today are the conservatives of tomorrow.

The point is that the young will soon join the electoral lists and will not hesitate to use their power. Therefore, let us not be too sensitive, or be defensive. Believe me, the young, and in fact everyone, would appreciate admission of fault as a beginning to solve any problem. As the German Field Marshal Karl Rudolf Gerd von Rundstedt once said, "Victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is always an orphan." The time has come for Umno Youth to be more mature and take the lead in leading the young.

Umno must unite against “the barbarians at the gates”

The Sun | May 6, 2001

THE UMNO divisional elections are over. While there will be many analyses and postmortems by all and sundry, the big picture that Umno must bear in mind is that “the barbarians are at the gates”. The opposition parties are gaining strength and Umno must meet this challenge head-on. But before this can be done, there are a few things that Umno needs to do.

Arguably the biggest challenge is to unite the party. With the divisional elections over, there is already talk of bitterness and complaints from the losers, some demanding remedy. While one can recognise some of the grievances, even bordering on sabotage and the infamous use of money politics, I think everyone must accept the outcome, especially if the process was duly carried out. There are even reports that the bitterness has reached a point of no return. The rift is serious, especially in states with a vast number of opposition seats, but candidates should be mature enough to accept the results, and pledge support to the leadership for the sake of unity.

Umno vice-president Mohd Najib Abdul Razak once said that unity is of the utmost importance in facing the Opposition. To the enemy; if an opposing force is disunited, its victory is assured. How can Umno contain the threat of the Opposition if it remains disunited?

In the last general election, there was ample evidence to suggest that in some areas, some Umno members were not supporting their own parts especially when individual leaders were not chosen to stand for elections.

The unfortunate perception of divisional elections is that those who hold high office expect to be named as electoral candidates. It is as if it is their right. First and foremost, divisional heads are to lead the party at the divisional level, and to take care of the needs of party members and of the Malays generally.

However, I wonder how many of these leaders realise their roles. A substantial number of MPs and state assemblymen see themselves as already serving the people. This in itself is debatable. I was struck to read about Selangor's advertising its services to the people. This is a good example of an attempt in form rather than substance.

In the 2004 general election, candidates should be chosen based on their contributions to be determined by their peers. They should be interviewed by party elders and grassroots members from the division, and not determined solely by the chief ministers. The division should be responsible for the success of their chosen candidates. In this way, a division will be more united for the candidates are their chosen one. There must be a decoupling between divisional leaders and election seats.

A stringent selection process should be instituted for the coming elections. Anyone has the right to apply but a select group will vet their applications. Yes, this group will be powerful, but their power will be subject to a check and balance mechanism to prevent undue concentration of power.

There has been much debate about money politics; Dr Mahathir Mohamad has come out with an interesting observation about rich politicians. To be fair, nowhere is it written that they are forbidden from being politicians. His statement reflects the leadership's frustration in dealing with this menace.

The second challenge is to put forth an agenda that caters to the needs of Malaysians in general, and the Malays specifically. Umno needs to do much more in getting the Malays on their side. The last elections showed that it has lost considerable support among them. It is really the result of their own doing and may not be easily rectified. It seems to me that the methods employed today are for yesterday, and certainly not for today, leave alone for tomorrow.

Patriotism today has different meanings to Malaysians. Some would even argue that criticising the government is a form of patriotism, especially if it is to improve the nation's image and service.

Patriotism today needs a re-evaluation. What does it mean to be a patriot? Is one less patriotic if he stands for justice? We need to be more self-critical and it is a start if leaders admit to their faults and share their views. The prime minister and his deputy came out very well when they admitted to the faults that had caused flash floods in the capital. We could all follow their examples.

The coming elections are just too serious to be left to fate. I have made my feelings for the opposition parties, especially PAS, known. I have this inherent distrust of people who use religion as a political platform. History has recorded that such groups abuse their power and, at times, believe that they hold a monopoly over God's wishes.

What I see in Afghanistan tells me that if unchecked, this country could well be ruled by the fanatics that most of us loathe. It will be difficult to argue when one is confronted with the *cul-de-sac* argument that this is God's wish and that this is what the holy book says.

Therefore, it is imperative that Umno gets its act together and faces the "barbarians at the gates". I for one will support the leadership in order to achieve this.

Umno must reclaim support it lost by default

The Sun | July 1, 2001

THE UMNO General Assembly ended on Saturday on a high note, with its president providing his most candid and at the same time witty speeches in recent times. It was a speech from someone who is not only confident but also sanguine. One cannot help but feel good, despite the not-so comfortable times that we live in today.

There is a consensus among many that Umno will now have to keep the momentum alive and move forward. When it comes to the Opposition, in particular Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia), my mind is somewhat closed. I have this deep suspicion of those who use religion as a tool for their own ends. Apart from being self-righteous, they actually hold many to ransom with their professed knowledge of religion.

To Muslims, in particular the Malays, to go against someone religious are considered a no-no. The religious-based party knows this and therefore exploits our ignorance.

PAS uses religion among the Muslim community to its advantage. By arguing that Umno is not Islamic and that those who are members will not have a place in heaven, PAS is displaying its blatant exploitation of the ignorance of the people. Naturally, one wonders why the average Malay would accept their argument. They may not believe PAS, but when confronted with such an argument by so-called religious-looking people, one may be taken in.

PAS is also exploiting the seemingly unhappiness of the Malays with the government. I have always argued that

PAS's support is on the rise by default. The Malays have no real liking for PAS, but are rather quite unhappy with Umno. Therefore, there is still hope provided that Umno moves forward and captures its lost ground among the Malays.

The time has come to meet the threat posed by PAS seriously. Umno and the government need to go on the offensive. To begin with, we must remain united. Although it appeared that even the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) was going to experience disunity, this seems to have been averted, judging from the statements from the party's head. It was Sir Winston Spencer Churchill who once said that, "In victory, one should show magnanimity." With his triumph, the MCA president can afford to be magnanimous, and I believe he is.

On a different note, the deputy prime minister recently mentioned that he hoped that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) could help the government in nation-building, instead of engaging in human rights and other issues that appear to place them in the anti-government category. While he is correct, I think the government could actually provide the initiative.

It must be understood that NGOs are pressure groups and their existence must be viewed positively for they provide the government with information on the kinds of issues that need attention and what groups are involved. The government should provide NGOs with the space to move and seriously engage them. More often than not, NGOs are manned by people who are intellectually-inclined and it is a pity that we tend to alienate these bright people. NGOs need the avenue and if the channels are closed, they will then resort to other methods which may not be very healthy.

NGOs are part of a vibrant society. Their existence is a positive indication of its level of sophistication. I prefer the existence of NGOs which are out in the open and receptive towards discussions than a society that is silent but whose stand we are unsure of.

The government should reach out to the NGOs and create a conducive environment whereby a win-win situation can emerge instead of fostering an often hostile atmosphere. A prudent government is one that engages and brings around those who speak the loudest and most critically to their side. I am sure that if the government just reaches out to the NGOs, they will be only too happy to be engaged.

I long for the day when such a situation arises. Listen we must if we are to defend our position, and not be swept aside by default.

Humility is good, but there's no room for poverty

The Sun | January 20, 2001

IT HAS BEEN more than two years since the last general election was held. While there have been many interpretations of the results, there was a general consensus that the Malay votes were split. However, one gets the impression today that the tide has turned against the Opposition and that Umno is winning lost ground. In other words, Barisan Nasional (BN, National Coalition) is on the rise while the Opposition is faltering.

During the campaign at the by election in Perlis, we saw the full strength of the ruling party. Although its candidate is from the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), we see the unity shown by the major components of the BN.

Many senior Umno members campaigned there, including vice-president Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, who made four visits there as well as the other vice-presidents and other prominent members of the party. This is a clear sign of Barisan's unity.

Within MCA too, we see its members getting together, putting their differences aside. This is political maturity at its best and a symbol of the power sharing and racial harmony at the heart of this country's well-being.

The Opposition, on the other hand, showed the kind of disunity often associated with it. Its candidate comes from Parti Keadilan (Justice Party) but the support shown by the other members was dismal and well illustrates the grave differences that exist within their ranks. Its lack of unity in terms of its goals and objectives will always render it ineffective, and will always lead to Parti Islam SeMalaysia's

(PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia) dominance within the Opposition Front. And of late, PAS has shown its unwillingness to be a moderate party, rearing its ugly head of intolerance to other views.

The Opposition is made up of parties that hold different views and will never be united. What will happen is that the strongest will dictate to the weaker ones. Parti Keadilan has failed to go beyond a one-issue party, and when that issue has faded, the rationale leading to its formation also erodes. The party is also full of prima donnas, has too many chiefs, and not enough "Red Indians". It is no surprise then that it has failed. When I heard the campaign calls from PAS, it is clear that they play on public ignorance and sentiments. As many of them are schooled in the Islamic tradition, they are in a position to exploit and manipulate their knowledge to their advantage. To a large extent, they are also making fools of the Malays.

I always tell my Malay colleagues that PAS treats us in a condescending manner. They are breaking up the Malays and making them weaker. As a community, they already face many challenges and do not need to be divided.

Within PAS, there are also extreme elements that are sometimes beyond control. Following the party's support for the Taliban and its urging of its members to go to Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban, many Malays have been alienated, especially the more discerning ones. I regard this episode as the ending of the infatuation of the Malay middle class with the Opposition. They have realised that PAS could turn this country upside down and they would lose their livelihood.

The stakes for the Malays remain high. It is not in their interest to support the Opposition for they could end up the losers. At the end of the day, the Malays in Malaysia are probably the most prosperous Malay community in the

world. They have achieved much when compared to other Malays living, say, in southern Thailand, Indonesia or even in Singapore. The Malays must realise that while there may be dissatisfaction ~ which is natural because man is never satisfied ~ we must not throw out the baby with the bath water.

PAS, I feel, is a party bogged down by its own arguments. It is obsessed with the setting-up of an Islamic state that it cannot even define. Its concept totally lacks substance. Someone observed that PAS is normally housed in very humble structures whereas Umno's is grand. But why should Islam be associated with poverty and dilapidated huts? While Muslims must exercise humility, they should never tolerate poverty and PAS perpetuates this low-level perception of Islam.

Islam deserves a better image and Malaysia projects it well. Our mosques are grand and Muslims here enjoy a high standard of living. We should be proud of this.

But we must not rest on our laurels and be content with this achievement. We must always strive for a higher standard of living for most, if not all, Malaysians. I feel ashamed when some countries proudly declare themselves as Islamic republics and yet their citizenry live in misery and deprived conditions. Their people even have to go abroad to seek employment.

PAS is a symbol of this phenomenon ~ an obsession with grand declarations and symbols while the population slide into oblivion and deprivation. We must not allow ourselves to be exploited and manipulated by this so-called Islamic party.

Malay unity talks hold potential for much good

The Sun | February 4, 2001

WEEKS have passed since the possibility of Malay unity talks was mooted. No matter how one views it, such talks can only result in good tidings for the Malay community. Communities that prevail in the face of challenges are the communities which flourish.

History is filled with groups which create their own diasporas, spreading their wings to different parts of the world. The Jews, for instance, are known to be very united, irrespective of where they are. Their economic wealth is a major source of their strength.

It is unfortunate that the Muslim *ummah* (community) has suffered a long history of wars and conflict among themselves. I always see the Iran-Iraq war and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as the worst examples of how Muslims brought about their own disunity. Within the Malaysian context therefore, the Malay unity talks will be good if all those concerned are sincere.

The objectives must be clear and accepted by all those concerned. Furthermore, Malay unity must not be seen in relation to other racial groups in the country, which exposes it to political exploitation. A Suqiu-type group indicates a misplaced objective and is quite amusing really.

The advocates of such groups do not seem to realise that by highlighting Malay rights, they are only highlighting the community's and the government's failure in the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP, now the National Development Policy), which I think is a false

premise. It is obvious that such advocates are playing a racial card which benefits none, least of all the Malays.

The Malay unity talks have also taken on a political angle. This is a more tangible objective. There are several possibilities. The first is for Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia) to join the Barisan Nasional (BN, National Coalition), as it had before.

For two decades, the political divide has taken a toll on Malay unity, separating those who favour a conservative Islam conventry and those who are more moderately inclined.

I recall a decade ago when the Malays were torn apart and mosques divided by the *kafir* (infidels) issue. Such divisions could well sow the seeds of destruction for the community, but thankfully the situation was contained. The thing about religion is that it can bring out the best, as well as the worst in us especially when it gets too emotional and even irrational.

If indeed PAS does indeed join BN, then this will be good for it will bring about political unity among the Malays. While there will be much bargaining, it will serve to set aside political differences and allow the government to bring about a better life for all, one that will be predicated on a much more equitable distribution of the economic pie.

PAS has often been portrayed as a radical party but it may not necessarily be so. Political parties and I regard PAS as one — undergo changes over time. Within PAS itself, there are also moderates and conservatives, and there is always some degree of tension between the two.

The important point is how such differences are played out. Unfortunately, in Umno the scenario can sometimes be quite vicious even as there are other differences which have been resolved from within far from the public gaze.

PAS may well therefore be moderate although this has to be seen within the overall context of conservatism. Their leaders and members are made up of ordinary people and fundamentally, like all political animals, power is what they seek. PAS can indeed be part of the BN's machinery and philosophy, and could well work with its components, especially Umno.

We have seen how the Labour Party in the UK transformed itself under Tony Blair. Under previous leaders such as Tony Benn, the party, with its militant tendency, was seen as being too radical; so much so that it helped put the Conservatives in power for three terms. It was only when Labour became more moderate—becoming closer in fact to the Conservatives in terms of its philosophy—did it reflect a more populist image. After all, radicalism is waning in Europe, even though there seems to be a disconcerting rise in Nazism.

An Umno PAS union will also benefit the rest of the country. There will be less competition between those trying to be more Islamic than the others, a situation which has manifested itself in ill-thought policies and has even given rise to negative perceptions and connotations.

We should all get on with our lives. At the end of the day, poverty and prosperity know no religious or racial boundaries.

The second possible scenario could be of a more restrained PAS, which might even lead to better coordinated allocation of seats during elections. Of course, there will always be those in each party who will not agree for fear they will lose out. Such selfish souls do not deserve to represent the Malays in any capacity.

They must make way for the larger picture of unity. The allocations must be based on performance and suitability,

and one would expect a more rigorous process for the selection of candidates for elections.

However, such thoughts are still hazy at this juncture as there is much to be discussed. What is more important is that the Malay community, being small in the first place cannot afford to remain disunited. History is full of examples whereby disunited communities fade to oblivion.

Unity is not an easy ideal to achieve in a sophisticated society such as ours. Different people have different aspirations and dreams.

But there is no doubt that Malaysia will continue to face all sorts of challenges from within and without. The sooner we are united, the sooner we will be able to seriously address the numerous demands made by our citizenry.

As a Malay, I dream of the day when Malays are no longer divided along political lines. We must strive for a better life for the community and for every Malaysian.

Yes, you may say that I am indulging in wishful thinking, but then again, we lack ideals that we should hold dear and which serve as a beacon for our future.

Being pragmatic may bring about changes in policy but ideals can lead to momentous change. Indeed, unity may well bring about a new era for Malaysia and signal the beginning of an enlightened nation.

When protocol gets in the way

The Sun | July 16, 2000

RECENTLY, the top leadership of the country called for less protocol in government. I believe this is not only timely but also a necessity, especially in narrowing the gap between the rulers and the ruled.

This is in fact in tandem with developments elsewhere around the world. The new millennium has brought in many changes, including the concept of the New Economy, where knowledge has been elevated to the pinnacle of any economy.

It appears that concomitant with this is the need for less rigidity and bureaucracy, and therefore, a less protocol-based environment. This is clearly being demanded by the people, who are already being empowered much more than previously.

There is just too much pomp and circumstance in our public life today. Today, if one attends an official function, especially when it involves either top governmental officials or members of the royalty, too much time and effort is spent in order to care for them.

I wonder whether these people actually insist on these cosmetics or it is the underlings who are just throwing their weight around.

However, I find that this is also changing, especially when such functions are organised by NGOs and the private sector. They tend to be much more simple, casual and straight to the point.

The government is still way behind in this regard. Sometimes, minutes are spent just to acknowledge the VIPs present, and sometimes when they are not even present.

I guess officials preparing the speech in their zealotry have not bothered to check the final list must begin to stress substance rather than form.

Then there are the luxury cars used by our officials. Kudos must be given to our prime minister who even in earlier days was proud to use the Proton as his official car.

Unfortunately, it was only when the economic crisis occurred that there was a change in this mentality, making the use of Proton cars compulsory.

I am surprised to note that our ambassadors, who are supposed to promote Malaysia, are not using the Proton, but rather foreign cars. I believe such practices must change immediately.

How do you expect foreigners to buy the Proton when the Malaysian representatives are using foreign cars? Obviously the same goes for officials here in Malaysia.

As with most monarchies, the bestowing of titles is natural. I believe this is good as it does reward people from all walks of life for their work and service.

Although there are titles that come with the jobs, there are many others who have earned just recognition. However, what is unfortunate is the scramble for such titles, leading to deep disappointment when the award is not given.

I know of rivalries among officials with each accusing the other of not supporting the recommendation.

What is sad is that the titles become much more important than the actual work they are supposed to perform. It is no wonder that the situation on the ground is sometimes neglected.

I am always pleased when I come across people with titles who prefer not to be referred by their titles. I know of

one Tan Sri who insisted that I refer to him by his first name, even threatening not to talk to me if I still call him Tan Sri.

However, due to my respect for him — or should I add, even greater respect — I still refer to him as Tan Sri. He, on the other hand, has given up on me and has accepted my calling him Tan Sri.

I admire top officials who take such an attitude, including not using their titles in their official letters. I notice this with both the prime minister and his deputy.

There is the further issue of the red carpet welcome. Although this is being used for members of the royal family and the two top positions in government, I certainly would like the latter to insist that the red carpets be done away with. I am sure such a move will be most refreshing for the people.

Malaysia has come a long way since we achieved our independence in 1957, granted the road has not been easy.

However, many would recognise that we are today facing our biggest challenges ever, given the rapid changes taking place, not only in terms of technology but also their impact on society.

Society is changing but sometimes, governments are slow to keep up. That is why old methodologies are still being resorted to when the environment is changing.

Outright projection and propaganda are clearly things of the past and we should leave them behind in the 20th century.

That is why when government officials deliver monologues and highlight achievements, they often fall on deaf ears. Government officials are sometimes too quick in defending themselves without first checking the details.

The people would appreciate a much more honest appraisal and, occasionally, an admission of fault.

One of the obvious changes of the new millennium is the creation of a diverse information network. Simply put, if one does not want to read the mainstream newspapers, one can read others that are available, including from the Internet. Choice is now the name of the game.

Therefore, the call for less protocol is, I believe, a move in the right direction. It is a start for it recognises that protocol does divide.

Don't let history fade into the past

The Sun | August 13, 2000

IN ONE OF Dr Mahathir Mohamad's earlier remarks, he stated that Umno must go back to its initial struggle. Indeed it has to, so that the current generation can realise that it has never been easy and that one has to continuously struggle for the betterment of the community and that of the nation.

In fact, it is important for us to be aware of our heritage and the struggles of our forefathers. They have fought and made sacrifices for the good of future generations.

One significant element of this is to ensure that the current generation is constantly reminded of the past. This can be done through the media, mainly documentary films, education in the teaching of history or naturally, through our museums.

Have you visited our national museum lately? I did precisely that not very long ago. To me, it was a horrific experience.

In my travels all over the world, I have often taken the time to visit museums, whether national, or specialised ones such as natural history or military museums.

On a recent visit to Muzium Negara (National Museum), I pretended to be a visitor trying to learn a little about the country. The presentations at the cultural and natural history sections appeared to have hardly changed over the years. I think they were essentially the same as they were when I was growing up in Kuala Lumpur in the 1960s.

They have moved the historical museum to another location, and this too was very patchy. There were so many aspects of our history left out. Coming out of it, one feels as

if Malaysia has little in its history. On the contrary, Malaysia's past is full of history that needs to be projected.

Lack of funds cannot really be the cause, especially in a country that boasts of so many achievements. It is meaningless to boast of the tallest building in the world and yet allow such a pathetic state of affairs to exist in the national museum.

The government must place more importance and significance on our museums. How does one expect its citizens to appreciate history with such a state of affairs?

Perhaps this explains why Malaysians generally do not appreciate their past. If the government makes no effort to do so, why should its citizens do otherwise?

I cannot but admire the importance that some countries place on their history and heritage. Western countries are at the forefront in this regard. You may argue that much of British history is the history of colonialism, but it is still history nevertheless. Notwithstanding the debate over this issue, one must appreciate the admirable ways in which they preserve their heritage, be it buildings or museums.

Take Blenheim Palace near Oxford for instance. It was built in the 18th century as a grateful nation's gift to the victorious Duke of Marlborough for his triumphs during the Wars of the Spanish Succession and was also the birthplace of Churchill, one of the most illustrious British prime ministers. Today, the palace opens to the public and tourists, and it is a spectacular sight one would admire.

Natural history is another important part of our heritage. In this regard, the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. is arguably the most interesting. The average Malaysian might not be so well exposed. Therefore, the government should ensure that such facilities exist to enhance the mind and to highlight our past.

It has been argued that Malaysians have no strong historical foundations. While we could blame others such as our colonial masters for our historical past, we cannot be doing this forever and at the same time do nothing to improve the situation. Ironically, one could argue that it was our historical past coupled with our own capable management since independence that brought prosperity to this country. Whether we like it or not, the British had left much for us to improve upon. The foundation left by them was strong and our leaders have improved on it.

We must do something that will improve our appreciation of history. After all, history itself is subject to re-interpretation.

Malaysians have achieved a lot in the last few decades. However, as we are constantly influenced by external forces through the media and the information technology (IT) explosion, there is an urgent need for us to be more mindful of our heritage, our past, our heroes and our forefathers. There will come a time when structures, edifices and buildings will crumble, but one's history lives on for eternity.

Reinterpreting independence

The Sun | September 3, 2000

MALAYSIA celebrated its 43rd *Hari Merdeka* (Independence Day) on August 31, 2000. On all accounts, Malaysians should be proud of the country's achievements. However, with globalisation and the rapid technological change taking place today, one wonders what the real meaning of independence is in the present environment.

To begin with, the whole concept of sovereignty is under siege. Several years ago, there were already intense debates about the end of the nation state as we know it. It is perhaps interesting to note that while the traditional understanding of the nation state is being challenged, nationalism has been on the rise. We saw ethnic-based conflicts emerging as well as states exerting their influence.

Nonetheless, there is a fundamental challenge to the notion of independence and this is due to the dependence on foreign investments as well as financial markets, and to the increasing role played by non-state actors. As such, we need to comprehend the reality of today's highly complex world.

The events taking place includes the shift of traditional pivots of power beyond the nation state. States are increasingly finding that they are losing control of their own destiny, and are gradually being replaced by other emerging powerful entities. Countries like Malaysia should be more realistic and pragmatic in their approach rather than merely engaging in highly emotive exercises, which sometimes give the impression that we are not facing the reality of the day.

We must remember that we are not alone and that it is not about the East and the West, instead we are faced with

an enormous change in the nature of doing things. Therefore, we should not make the traditional notion of independence as the most important thing in our lives, or of the nation, but rather we should ensure that the country and Malaysians are taking advantage and are positioning ourselves in this nascent emerging world. It is critical that we prepare ourselves and not use our energy to fight and resist change.

Anyhow, Malaysia is not as independent as it is sometimes made out to be. To begin with, Malaysia is quite dependent on foreign labour. It has often been said that if all the foreign labour were to leave the country the economy could well grind to a halt. Then you have the technology. While we could be critical of the Western world for their double standards and sometimes condescending viewpoints, we are almost totally dependent on their technology and expertise. Rightly, we talk of the need for the transfer of technology. However, we also need to be mindful of the fact that we sometimes have limited capacity to absorb such transfers.

While we talk of the threats of globalisation, we must remember that this country is very much a product of it. Our biggest markets lie in the Western countries and if indeed our foreign policy is an extension of our national interests, surely, our interests lie in seeing further improvement in our relations with our main trading partners, rather than the majority of the developing world.

There is nothing unique about this as far as Malaysia is concerned. Sometimes, we think that we are so special that we feel that we are alone in our fight. Many other countries are facing the same challenges. The difference lies in how countries manage and handle these realities.

As the Malaysian economy is so intertwined with the world's it is pointless to argue against the inevitability of a

liberalised global economy. While we may be able to convince developing countries to be mindful of the forces of globalisation, it would be more meaningful if we could propose some alternative models and approaches to them.

In facing the challenges, what we need to do is to garner our energy and focus on how to compete. Look at our car industry, Proton. While this is our national pride, we also need to realise that Proton will have to make the necessary adjustments, including merging with other world automakers. This is inevitable if Proton is to survive. There will be those who would argue that our national pride will be hurt if we merge with other car-makers. The reality is such that we can no longer talk of indigenous industries anymore, but rather find a niche as part of a larger industry.

Reading the newspapers over the Merdeka celebrations, one would like to see a much more critical analysis of the situation, rather than the usual kudos. As the saying goes, "Self-praise is no praise but a disgrace." It is most unfortunate that while we talk of achieving independence for 43 years, we are still bickering over basic issues such as Malay rights and the division of the races. I cannot imagine that the parties concerned have not sat down and talked it out in order to clarify things, rather than bringing it to the media, which has the nasty habit of sensationalising things.

We talk of being proud to be independent and yet we can't even talk sensibly about issues that affect us. We should be less emotional, more pragmatic and mature. I cannot imagine that the Chinese would question Malay rights, so I believe there is probably a misunderstanding or a misinterpretation, which can be resolved by discussion.

It is time for us to think of Malaysians as one. If priority must be given, it should be given to the needy, irrespective of race. Quotas, if necessary, should be determined by income brackets. There are poor Malays, Chinese and

Indians. Malaysia is a rich country and I cannot imagine that there is not enough wealth to be created for all.

We have achieved so much, and yet we still have so much more to achieve. To me, *Hari Merdeka* is a time of reflection. While we fly the flag high, we should also cherish and fight for a better system, for a much more equitable distribution of wealth with stronger institutions. We should not shy away from the challenges and be like an ostrich, burying our heads in the sand and pretending that problems will just fade away.

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Speaking up for a fair landing

The Sun | October 1, 2000

FOLLOWING the last general election, there is a consensus that the ruling coalition, in particular the United Malay National Organisation (Umno), needs to address a number critical issues. Although the Barisan Nasional (BN, National Coalition) managed to maintain its two-third majority in parliament, the losing of an additional state to the opposition indicated the erosion of support for the ruling party.

In the aftermath, there were various calls for the party to take the necessary steps to improve itself. Some measures were implemented by Umno, but more needs to be done, particularly in terms of party reforms. I would like to paint five possible scenarios of the future direction of Malaysian politics, starting with the worst case.

First is the "crash" scenario. The worst case for a government is a revolution, an overthrow of a regime. Fortunately, this is nowhere to be found on the Malaysian political radar screen. Although groups such as the Al-Ma'unah talk about overthrowing the government, such violent expressions of dissent are isolated cases and lack public support.

Another version of this scenario, from Umno's standpoint, would be the loss of power to an opposition party. This is unlikely, given not only the racial composition of the electorate, but also the state of the opposition parties, which are not united. One of the drawbacks of the opposition is their inability to come together to form a permanent coalition along the lines of the Barisan. The

parties are also extreme in nature. If reforms are not undertaken and the ruling party fails to address a number of issues, further erosion of support could one day lead to the loss of power.

The second is the "hard landing" scenario. This would be a threshold of the first, whereby the ruling party, particularly Umno, finds itself in a weakened position and lose some states. The ruling party has then a simple majority, just enough to form the government.

It could even be that the results show no clear winner, resulting in a hung parliament. If the stalemate is unresolved, the King would then have to use his discretionary powers to appoint a prime minister. In normal circumstances, the choice is obvious as it would be the leader of the party with the majority in parliament.

As a result of the 1999 results, PAS finds itself in direct competition with Umno. Hitherto, Umno had never had any real threat, but now finds itself facing serious competition.

There is a lot of talk in the corporate sector about the need to maintain one's competitive advantage. I believe Umno will need to think in the same way. In this, it appears as if Umno is on the defensive and reacting to PAS, giving title false impression that it is the weaker rather than the much stronger party. It has to see itself as a corporate player, faced with a strong competitor. Therefore, it has to be engaged in a whole series of activities within the party to address the competition, including the need to re-market its 'products'.

I can sense the frustration of the Umno leadership as the party has brought so much development to the people. No one can dispute this. Very few governments have been as successful in transforming rural and low-income-based

communities into a vibrant middle class as well as providing the majority with a reasonable standard of living.

The problem may not be so much in the product but the way it is being marketed. There are so many examples of corporations that fail to market their excellent products finding their market share reduced.

It will help if Umno starts thinking in terms of market share and the possibility of losing a considerable number of its customers.

The third is the "no landing" scenario. This is the status quo scenario — the ruling party continues to work in a "business as usual" atmosphere.

Umno is still very much driven by internal squabbling and appears not to be united in meeting the threat from the opposition. As someone said, Umno guns are always pointing inwards.

This scenario is certainly not sustainable over the medium and longer terms as it has to develop into the other scenarios. Like any vehicle, it has to stop and refuel; it has to land sometime, somewhere. Therefore, a no-landing scenario is only temporary.

The fourth is the "soft landing" scenario. In this the ruling party takes on the issues and begins the process of institutional reforms.

Umno goes on the offensive and puts its position on the defensive. The government starts to address the erosion of public confidence on a number of our institutions. In the coming elections, it maintains its two-thirds majority, although the position of the states may not necessarily reflect any improvement.

The last is the "perfect-landing" scenario. This may be seen from different perspectives, namely the ruling party's and society's.

From the party's standpoint, a perfect landing would not only be the maintenance of its two-thirds majority, probably at the same level as the 1995 results, but also the gaining of, control of all the states in the country, and thereby putting the opposition into retreat.

From the perspective of society, a perfect landing would be the successful transformation of Malaysia into a higher level of democracy predicated on strong political and economic fundamentals. This would mean that the government is addressing the critical issue of the erosion of public confidence by bringing back professionalism into the system. Many believe that despite the erosion, our institutions are strong.

What appears to be lacking is professionalism, and to act without fear or favour — just keeping to one's own professionalism. A perfect landing would also see the country managing its racial and economic divides.

In observing the political landscape, one gets the feeling that while everything appears to be on the quiet — all quiet on the western front, if you like — there is disquiet among the population. It must be discomfiting for the government.

Sometimes, it is better for people to voice their frustrations openly rather than harbouring them and releasing them through the ballot box. This would be a rude awakening and by then it would be too late.

The 1999 elections must be seen as a respite for Umno. It thought that as there were only sporadic demonstrations, they reflected the views of a minority.

The people, in particular the Malays, were or are unhappy and kept it to themselves, and voted against Umno when the time came.

Therefore, Umno should be reaching out much more, and they should encourage people to voice their opinions.

The time has come for us to be more open to criticisms and dissenting views. If man has not been critical and did not ask questions, we would still be in the dark ages.

We must also be brave to voice our opinions. We may be frowned upon and even dismissed by others, but in doing so, we can be satisfied that we have maintained our dignity and decency. As Fidel Castro once said in 1956, "History will absolve me." One of the reasons why the West is currently the engine of inventions is because of its open environment—the ability to voice one's opinions. This need not only be political; it can be in any sphere—including the corporate sector.

It would seem a cloud of fear has descended upon our society and it cuts across our various sectors. The *periok nasi* syndrome is inhibiting our development, and as long as we continue to remain indifferent or apathetic, we may well be in for a rude awakening one fine day.

Reinventing museums for a sense of history

The Sun | December 10, 2000

I WAS SURPRISED when the date December 7 came and went without any serious mention of its significance in our history. On that date, 59 years ago, the Japanese launched an attack on the American base at Pearl Harbour and at around the same time, they were also landing their troops on the beach of Kota Baru. In what turned out to be a Japanese version of *blitzkrieg* or lightning war, Malaya was engulfed by the invading troops in a matter of two months, culminating with the fall of Singapore on February 15, 1942.

While the invasion was impressive militarily—for instance, the simultaneous landing of troops at three different areas of the peninsula, creating invasion routes, and the utilisation of bicycles for mobility—the Malaya campaign caused untold misery and destruction. My maternal grandfather perished during that conflict.

It seems a pity that such an important event is not acknowledged and little attempt is made for the younger generation to be reminded that Malaya, while still a colony, was once invaded and the event is still in living memory. While there will be those who would argue that the invasion assisted in the eventual withdrawal of the British, it is still not justifiable nor should such an argument be seriously entertained, for Malaysians died and suffered during the war.

The invasion must also be a grim reminder of the real world that we live in today. If one is to look at the 20th-century history of this country, none other than Asians themselves had seriously threatened our security. Apart from Japan, Indonesia launched the *Konfrontasi*, with

limited military operations conducted against us. Even this event, I believe, is not taken on board as a significant event in our history. These events do illustrate that, as a nation, we should be mindful of other countries, and not to believe that Asians are fine, while others are not. As it has often been said, "Yesterday's friend is today's enemy, and that today's enemy is tomorrow's friend." In fact, if one does a serious analysis of the security situation, one should be ever mindful of our neighbours and the kinds of threat that could emanate from them. Obviously, one should try and remain engaged in that area in order to manage the situation.

The point that I would like to make here is that it appears that we do not make any serious attempt to inculcate a sense of history in our population at large. I have decided to mention it here simply because I was rather struck by the absence of any mention of the significance of the date of December 7 or the fact that we were invaded by the Japanese. For the following three years or so, many Malaysians suffered.

Apart from acknowledging those who had sacrificed their lives, whether in the military or the general population, little was done. During Warrior's Day, we do have some events, although it appears to involve only a small section of the population, i.e., either the military or servicemen. Such significant historical events should be given recognition in a nationwide campaign. They are certainly more important than some other events which have been launched on a grand scale.

One must however acknowledge the significant attempt by the Malaysian military—in particular, the army—to initiate the movie, *Lieutenant Adnan*, a heroic tale of a Malayan officer who died while defending his homeland. Prior to this, the only movie of this genre was the P. Ramlee

classic *Sergeant Hassan* (1958). I regard this movie as one of my all-time favourites.

I have earlier written about the pathetic state of our museums, in particular, our Muzium Negara (National Museum). Obviously, museums are ideal platforms for people to be reminded of the past. However, given the kinds of patchy stuff that are found in our museums, it is no wonder that most folks do not appreciate them. If indeed there are problems in the running of museums, then perhaps the authorities should consider either privatising the museums or providing a creative scheme for their rejuvenation.

When I visit our museums, I cannot believe that our history is so thin, or that there are so few artifacts for display. Museums everywhere, to some extent suffer a similar fate. However, I know of some museums that are innovative in their displays and are actually worth a visit. It is really a case of giving enough importance and significance to our history, and then finding the financial resources to upgrade our museums. I cannot imagine why a rich nation like Malaysia, with excellent infrastructure, has only the 'wonderful' façades of the museums to boast of. Upon entry into the edifices, one's impression is quickly eroded. I am pleased to note, however, that the memorials of Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak are most commendable and perhaps others should take the cue.

I have always advocated the need for us to pay a little more attention to our history as a way for the young generation to appreciate our past. Our past may not be as glorious as some; immortalised by Austerlitz, if you are French; and Waterloo, if you are British. However, given a more creative look at our past, ours could be just as glorious. It is perhaps not a question of rewriting history, but rather of reinventing museums.

Leaders should consult those they govern

The Sun | February 25, 2001

I HAVE ALWAYS suspected that there is a global conspiracy among taxi drivers, not to be around when you need them, and to be in abundance when you don't require their services. Whether you are in London, New York or Kuala Lumpur, this always appears to be the case!

I was in a cab recently and, as always, asked the driver for his assessment of his profession. This one in particular, I thought, was the most articulate. He equated taxi drivers with rubber-tappers, in the sense that much depends on the external environment. On a rainy day, the earnings of both are considerably reduced. He also lamented their dwindling wages, which he attributed to the improvements in public transport. He mentioned that these days buses are air-conditioned compared with some years ago when a taxi was the closest one will ever get for cool travelling.

Ironically, it is the government's success in improving public transportation, such as the Light Rail Transit (LRT) and buses that has placed taxi driving in a bind. Another problem he raised concerned licences, which he believes should be given to the individual, rather than corporations. This grievance seems widespread.

I recall the debate over a large corporation being more efficient in managing taxis with their greater resources. While there is some merit to this argument, the corporation must take care of their drivers. The occupation is facing challenges not caused only by the changing environment, and there are a number of points worth noting.

Firstly, while there have been many complaints about taxi drivers, one must also understand their plight. Passengers must spare a thought or two for their reduced takings. A taxi driver must earn beyond some RM80 per day before he is able to earn anything for himself. That sum goes to the vehicle's rental, fuel and other expenses.

Secondly, success also brings with it new challenges. Improvements do not necessarily please everyone. Therefore, one should never gain too much, especially at the expense of others.

Thirdly, in life there is always somebody who is worse off than you. One should always be thankful for what one has, although this does not mean that one should be complacent. One must remember that while one may have legitimate complaints concerning anything—in this case, taxis—they ought not to condemn the whole profession. They are also trying to earn a living just like the rest of us. This brings me to a point I often make, and that is that the government should always be mindful of the implications of its policies. Unfortunately, more often than not, policies are being thought out without consulting the groups that will be affected.

Many professions have their own associations, and this should facilitate dialogues between those who rule and those who are ruled. Many would like to see the gap between them bridged.

On an entirely different subject, I am shocked over the recent killings in Kalimantan, the result of ethnic clashes. Throughout history, the most brutal killings have often been linked to either religious or ethnic issues. Such conflicts lead to the release of the evil within us. What is happening in neighbouring Indonesia must be a painful lesson for all of us in Malaysia. Like any multiracial society, Malaysia is in a somewhat precarious situation. Thankfully, through a

variety of factors—such as having prudent leaders who represent the various communities—we have managed well and have been able to contain the sort of unpleasantness that has happened the world over.

Nevertheless, we have seen some cracks in our midst which could well become serious. Here I advocate caution, and will support the government when it acts swiftly against any group that plays the racial card. Nobody must be given the chance to destroy the decades of peace that we have enjoyed. Although all around us may be up in flames, we must continue to uphold our way of life and resist the evil of racism which, according to some psychologists, lurks in most of us. If this be so, we must consciously suppress it and the authorities must take a proactive stand in fighting the dangers it poses.

With regard to the Malay unity talks, it is unfortunate that these were postponed. But I am happy that Umno has come out to state that the talks will still be held and that preparatory discussions will continue. We must be able to manage the community's expectations where these talks are concerned, and sometimes it may be best that they are held quietly. However, the process is already public knowledge and any one side may be unable to resist using the media to its own advantage, thereby making an already difficult process even more so. As one wise man told me the other day, it is the motive that will ultimately determine the outcome. Let us hope that unity is the primary goal, rather than mere publicity.

Right of the majority to enjoy peace takes precedent

The Sun | April 22, 2001

THERE IS JUST too much hypocrisy out there. So much so that it has become the norm rather than the exception. Without sounding pedantic, various degrees of hypocrisy exist. Its worst form is when one party becomes self-righteous in a manner that is tantamount to preaching; as when one country preaches to another of its wrongs but is itself guilty of precisely the same misdeeds.

We see this with the US when it preaches about human rights while it is itself beset with a high degree of racism that appears to cut across its system. The recent riot in Cincinnati is a case in point. Given the kinds of racism prevalent within its borders, I do not think the US can take the moral high ground internationally. I believe we should not at all listen to its hypocritical calls, but should rather just ignore them. If need be, we should go on the offensive and reveal to the world the same violations to be found all over the US itself.

The bottom line for any government is really about bringing and maintaining stability and prosperity to its people. To a large extent, the dictum "The end justifies the means" is what I am advocating, but with a caveat attached. The means must be within the law and be acceptable to the majority. While I cherish the rights of the individual based on the stage of a state's development, the interests of the larger community must override those of the individual. In this respect, the move by the Malaysian government in taking preventive measures—with the arrest of some individuals—to forestall what could have been an

uncontrolled fiasco is justified. It could even be applauded as the interests of peace override all other considerations, including possible international backlash.

While we should be mindful of international reaction, what is more critical is the protection of the citizenry. I have seen the kinds of police brutality that take place in some Western countries against minority groups. The police in these countries have also been unleashed against groups that advocate violence. One recalls the militant trade unions in the UK when there were street battles between union members and the police. It became quite bloody at times.

I believe that the government must take the necessary steps to quell violent groups, or those who advocate violence as a means of achieving their objectives. It is easy for such groups to create instability and once a government allows violence to break out, it is difficult to stop it. It is better to nip it in the bud and this is what the government did recently. I think we should be thankful the state has taken strong measures in the interest of the majority.

History is full of examples where the minority, with the false notion and claim that it represents the majority, takes on a violent stand. It unleashes a series of violent acts, usually beginning with street demonstrations. Against such a momentum, this could well result in wider instability which will affect the majority at the end of the day. Minority groups have caused many problems and have created much chaos in history. There are also ironical instances where such groups, after achieving their objectives, turn out to be worse rulers than those they have overthrown, much to the chagrin of the majority. The majority must not be mesmerised by the calls of such minorities, however alluring they may sound. After all, promises are cheap.

Malaysians are generally peaceful. We just want to get on with our lives and would like the government to be

responsive to our needs. I believe most of us are generally content with the present leadership and would like to see it prevail. I feel that most of us are in full support of the government's recent action against the group that advocated violence. Sometimes, individuals must be sacrificed for the sake of peace for the majority.

To the international community, especially in the West, I say, "Look at your own societies and the double standards prevailing in your countries before playing judge and jury." The state must take stern action against groups that advocate violence, as in the case of the Al-Ma'unah. In this respect, the government has taken the right steps to protect our interests.

While we support the government's actions, especially in its preservation of general peace and prosperity, we need to continue to demand for a better life. We have achieved a lot but there is so much more that needs to and can be done. Whenever I return from a trip, I cannot but feel that we have done well for ourselves. But, like everything else in life, one is never satisfied and this is good as it keeps the government on its toes. In this sense, we citizens must play a more positive role by pressuring the government to meet our rising expectations.

A progressive society is dynamic, more so in the case of Malaysia as it is a highly internationalised state. We have unrestricted travel and access to a range of media and communications, and the government must progress in tandem with society. Sometimes, the government is ahead but at other times society moves faster.

Malaysia is now at a crossroads. We want to become a developed society. In fact, based on our extensive infrastructure, we are already one. However, true development must be accompanied by a mature society, and this is our biggest challenge.

Violent outbursts signal looming social disaster

The Sun | April 29, 2001

WHAT'S HAPPENING to our society? Almost every day we read in the newspapers the signs of a deteriorating environment. We hear not only of gruesome crimes but also petty fights ending in deaths. Then there is classroom violence, although not yet as bad as that in the US. If the laws governing gun possession in Malaysia were as liberal as those in the US, I feel we would see such weapons being used in our classrooms.

One school of thought argues that all of this is an inevitable consequence of development. If so, does it mean that the more we turn into a developed country, the more we may expect deterioration in the moral fabric of our society?

I have argued that there are signs that our society resembles the West, although there are some quarters that reject this totally. It has to do with our concept of development, which admittedly follows the Western model. Just what is our notion of development?

Most of us see the Kuala Lumpur skyline with its impressive buildings, as one aspect of development. Especially from the developing world, are often mesmerised by the concrete jungle that is Kuala Lumpur. One of this as we often boast about having the tallest building in the world. But isn't this very Western? Are buildings really what development is all about? Interestingly, in the West today, tall structures are not necessarily favoured. Paris, for instance, restricts the number of floors to a building.

I am not suggesting that we should follow this or that tall buildings are bad. It is that our concept of development

is very much a Western notion. I, for one, am comfortable with this.

One of the causes of unhealthy social trends is the pressures of the rat race. We are too obsessed with wealth. We have achieved what most Western countries have within a very short time. While this is something to be proud of, our society appears to be lagging behind, and so we falter. If we are not mindful and do not take the necessary steps, we could well face a societal disaster soon.

Being developed is much more than just bricks and mortar. It is about attitudes, outlook, and the maturity of the mind. In fact, the more developed a society is, the narrower is the gap between the rich and the poor, between the educated and the uneducated. This to me is what being developed is about. The ones with more must be willing to get less.

There is much talk of providing societal safety nets. While this is tied to the economic argument, there is also the social aspect. Do we have enough of this? In a recent case, onlookers could not even get through to an emergency number.

On a different subject altogether, the recent flash floods in Kuala Lumpur forced me to visit our historical museum near Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square). My car stalled right in front of it. While waiting for the tow truck, I went for a quick visit.

Going through the rather tiny premises, one gets the impression that our history is very short and that Malaysia is a young nation. The displays were impressive, though we could be more creative. I must say though, the English used could be improved. There was one section entitled 'The Nationalism' when 'The Rise of Nationalism' would be more appropriate.

In that section, we should also include the Chinese and Indians, for they too fought for independence. Nationalism, after all, comes from the word 'nation', and is not confined to a single race or ethnic group.

Finally, someone in Parliament suggested that Mandarin should be introduced in schools. As there 's much talk of unity, or the lack of it, I have always argued that all Malaysians must be proficient in at least one of the local languages apart from their own mother tongue, *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language), and English. We must all realise that racial unity is a two-way process.

Much as the Chinese and Indians must know about Malay culture and language, Malays should also learn to speak Mandarin, Cantonese, Tamil or Hindi. Making this compulsory would go a long way towards a better understanding and appreciation of our respective ways of life.

Concomitant with this, there have been hints about the future of national-type Chinese or Indian schools. One school of thought advocates their closure based on the idea that they do not promote integration. To those who subscribe to such a view, please remember that by the same argument, the fully residential schools, which are mainly for the Malays, should then be either closed or open to all. No institution should be mono-ethnic in nature and this includes Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM, Mara Technology University).

To the Malay groups, please remember that this argument is a double-edged sword. I would even argue that the spirit of the New Economic Policy (NEP, now the National Development Policy) should be continued with one major difference: that the division between *bumiputera* (indigenous locals) and non-*bumiputera* be abolished and replaced by one determined by income level. There are poor

Malays, poor Chinese and poor Indians. After all, one of the NEP's pillars is to eradicate poverty, irrespective of race. All Malaysians have built Malaysia and we must remember this at all times.

Deviants and anarchists bode ill for the rest

The Sun | June 10, 2001

MANY Malaysians must have been quite shocked when they read recently that a spate of robberies and killings, including bombings, were linked to a religious-based group connected with international terrorist movements. This is not good for Malaysia. It creates the impression that this country is a haven for such groups, and could well signal a dangerous trend. We have seen such groups surface and become militant for a variety of reasons in several Muslim countries. Once this occurs, the country concerned is faced with instability.

The gruesome ritual killing of a man in Kedah was also connected with deviant teachings. We have just recovered from the Al-Ma'unah episode and we are now told that all these are happening. Of the bizarre case in Kedah, apparently the neighbours had been complaining to the authorities, but no action was taken.

The government must remain firm when dealing with militant groups, especially when they mix religion and politics with crime. In history, when terrorist groups jumbled all these up, they tended to be political, although their demands were extremely vague.

The objectives of the terrorist groups that proliferated in the 1970s appeared to be something like a world revolution, whatever that means. Today, we are told that these groups talk about setting up a pure Islamic state, whatever that entails.

The average Malaysian is worried about the possibilities. I recalled that our neighbours have accused

Malaysia of being the training ground for such Islamic groups. They did not accuse the government of supporting them, but felt that locals were involved.

That is not impossible. Such terrorist groups often use neighbouring countries, especially peaceful ones, and then use them as launching pads for forays into their own countries. We must identify such groups and their sympathisers.

The government should now take the initiative and act decisively. In the Al-Ma'unah episode, the security forces proved to be effective in dealing with militant groups. The government must have a proper strategy to handle the issue which can easily get out of hand. The approach must be comprehensive in nature.

There must also be an assessment as to why Malays are susceptible to such deviationist groups. If they are frustrated, how can we address their problems? Sociologists will argue that the emergence of such groups is symptomatic of a wider societal issue. The authorities must not treat the matter lightly. In fact, we should treat these elements as enemies of the state.

On a different subject, I notice that the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) problem appears to be wider than first thought. In my previous articles, I talked of the need for United Malay National Organisation (Umno) to take the threat from Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia) seriously, and now we have another major Barisan Nasional (BN, National Coalition) component suffering from internal dissension. The opposition parties must be quite happy with the current situation.

Many of BN's problems are self inflicted. In the Malaysian roulette, as opposed to the Russian one, we put

in six bullets in six chambers and appear to enjoy destroying ourselves.

I am duly worried that the Opposition, especially PAS, looks better in this regard and BN appears not to be too concerned about the threat. I say this because a number of its component parties still have the time to fight within themselves.

There are so many issues out there that require urgent attention; from education to the challenge of the young. BN, specifically Umno, should start preparing itself but in a more systematic manner. I understand that Umno Youth is already preparing, although I am not sure whether they are putting the cart before the horse. For instance, if they are to get feedback from the young about their problems, then Umno Youth and Umno must be able to address them. It is no use merely getting feedback and not meeting their expectations.

I am not suggesting that the government should entertain all the demands of the young, but at least they must appear to listen and to take the necessary action. The situation has changed. Previously, the competition had been weak and the thought of them coming to power was remote. Today, however, the competition is real and I wonder whether PAS is far more flexible in its approach in attracting young Malays. For instance, a complaint of young Umno members is that they are unable to be candidates for elections because of the very hierarchical nature of the party. Therefore, one needs to rise and fight within one's division before one can ever get anywhere.

I once suggested that when it comes to election candidates, the constituency party should determine who is best suited, and should not be swayed by positions. The constituency party will be in the best position to know the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. This really

empowers the division and the constituency and it will give them a better feel and a higher stake. I think there is no choice but to start preparing for the next general elections, even though we are still some three years or so away.

Militants and b'gots need not ther

The Sun | August 19, 2001

THE BIG STORY these days is about the discovery of a *mujabideen* group in Malaysia, some members of which have been tied to Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS Islamic Party of Malaysia). I believe the government should come down hard on such groups, as they are not only militants, but worse, fanatics. The so-called Taliban wannabes may set a dangerous trend in this country, and one that we do not need. If there are Malaysians who have the tendency to join such groups and are sympathetic to their cause, then they have no place in this country. We must speak out against racial bigots and the self-righteous.

Muslims who go around destroying idols or bombing churches are not Muslims as far as I am concerned. It is very clear in the Holy Quran that Islam respects other religions and that there is no compulsion in the religion. During the time of the Prophet, Islam coexisted with other religions. In Malaysia, we have been practicing this for generations and those who do not respect this sacrosanct principle ought to be punished.

The big question that everyone is asking today is, why is it that despite the apparent religious revival, especially among Muslims, various kinds of negative activities, as well as crimes tends to be more prevalent among members of this community. Is there something in the way we teach Islam? While moral values are inherent in the teachings, why is the situation so unsatisfactory? We need to be more truthful with ourselves and admit it if we have made a mistake.

On a different note, a few days ago, a schoolboy was beaten up by a group of youngsters outside a school in middle-class Kuala Lumpur. What I found disturbing is the apathy among the people who witnessed the incident. No one actually came forward to help the boy except for an elderly gentleman who rescued the boy from further beating. Kudos to that gentleman and shame on the others who merely stood by and watched the spectacle.

I do not want to generalise on this and accuse Malaysians of being apathetic. However, there appears to be a correlation between public apathy and affluence as compared to the cooperative environment of the *kampungs* (villages).

I recall an incident a year ago, when I was buying some fruits along the North-South Highway and an accident occurred right in front of our eyes. Without any hesitation, the boys who were selling fruits rushed to the aid of the crash victims. I felt proud that these boys were so civic minded.

It could well be that people living in rural areas are much more willing to help compared to the people in towns and cities. I suspect that as rural areas gradually become urbanised, they too will lose this spirit of being helpful. Although it is not just about money, it may be said that the rich tend to compensate through money rather than by sharing the feeling of suffering.

While we talk of the need to go back to our roots and not lose our value system, this is obviously easier said than done. I understand that community centres are being built in order to foster community spirit or comradeship that is important in building a society.

However, we must not end up creating an artificial environment and where community spirit only exists during a 'function' and everyone leaves that behind when they

return home. It is not an easy thing as we all lead different lives and face different kinds of challenges.

I find that our society is really undergoing a transitional period and that we are all trying to find our space and build our lives around it. While wealth appears to be the goal for many, and this is something understandable, perhaps we should be reminded of a saying by Mahatma Gandhi, who once said that, "There is enough for everyone's needs, but not enough for a person's greed."

One nation under the King

The Sun | December 16, 2000

THE ASCENDANCY of the Raja of Perlis as the 12th Yang di-Pertuan Agong—in accordance with a unique system of rotation for the throne—is a good example of the stability of the Malaysian political structure. As a modern-day monarch, the King is symbolic of the nation, united at the highest level although the individual states have their own rulers.

Despite the possibility of dispute among the various states and the federal government the system has worked well for Malaysia. It provides a degree of autonomy yet maintains unity. Tribute must be given to our forefathers for their foresight and wisdom. Although such a system appears to be sound for countries that have historical divisions, not all have turned out happily. It takes more than a mere constitutional provision for it to be accepted and to work well. The two critical factors are prudent leadership and a commitment to power-sharing. Malaysia, despite its imperfections, has been able to maintain a balance between the needs of the federal government and the constituting states.

Today, monarchies all over the world are in constant danger of becoming irrelevant. Most monarchies know this and therefore often try to reinvent themselves to ensure that an often-sceptical public retain the required respect for the institution. We have seen how the British monarchy has come under intense criticism and public scrutiny. Various quarters favour a limit to its power. Some have even called for an end to the monarchy. After all, although the British

managed to avoid a revolution, they did send a king to the gallows. The French were more determined to terminate royal dominance.

In Malaysia, the monarchy remains a symbol of statehood and of the people. The King is the head of state and performs this duty with the utmost dignity. Due to the unambiguous position of the King in the Constitution—as a constitutional monarch—the institution of kingship remains relevant and faces no challenge now or in the future. It will remain so for a long time to come and I believe most Malaysians are happy with the existing institution of kingship. The Constitution actually ensures the survival of the monarchy and, in this respect, Malaysians are lucky.

Our northern neighbour has a well-respected monarch today. King Bhumipol's dedication to his people and country ensures a deep respect among the Thai people. I recall an incident some 17 years ago during my first visit to Bangkok. While walking on a major thoroughfare, I noticed that people stopped. In a while, the king's motorcade passed and they bowed. It is a fact that the Thais have a deep respect and feeling for their king. We have also seen how he had intervened when there was political instability, for instance, during the abortive coup of General Chinda Kraprayoon. There are discussions on the future of the king—most probably the current crown prince according to the grapevine, the king's daughter rather than her brother. There is even talk of problems and a challenge to the monarchy, but I am confident that he becomes king.

Once lost, peace won't easy to regain

The Sun | January 6, 2002

THERE is an expression that advises us on the need to look back in order to look forward. If this is so, what can we see of the year 2001 to give us some indication of what is in store for us this year? I guess everyone, including soothsayers, will have some of their own predictions. Well, let me give my 10 cents' worth.

The events of September 11 shocked the world and the repercussions will be with us right into this year and beyond. Naturally, the Americans claim that these events have changed the world, even though most of the world was not directly affected. Such statements indicate that the US regards itself as not only the centre of the world, but the world itself. After all, many Americans have never stepped outside their own country.

But while the world may be going up in smoke, we in Malaysia enjoy relative peace. The only adverse event that Malaysians suffered during the New Year celebrations in Kuala Lumpur was the traffic jam. In Indonesia, someone hurled a grenade into a crowd. What a contrast!

Politically, it has been relatively quiet except for the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) rivalries and the Sarawak elections. I think there should be less politicking and more attention paid to getting the job done.

I also find that generally the government has been more responsive and this is always a good sign. While I believe we should highlight problems through various channels, including the media, we should report the facts and not pluck something out of the sky. Last week there were

reports in a Malay newspaper about projects involving the Ministry of Education. Apparently, the figures quoted by the paper were inaccurate and made things out to be worse than they actually are.

I guess some people just want to run down the government. Unfortunately such reporting will reflect on the leadership. Our leaders have come out with good ideas and a sound vision. The bureaucracy's task is to implement these ideas and policies. The newspaper concerned seemed to put the blame on the bureaucracy, and I wonder whether there were any meetings and discussions between the officials and the media on the issue. While the media should check its figures before publishing them, the government on its part must be more willing to meet with the media to discuss the issues concerned. There are times when you need to discuss such issues behind closed doors, rather than to play them up.

The media must first liaise with the officials involved. If this does not work, they could then take up the issues. It would seem that the reports were made to make the government look bad when—in my opinion—the government has shown much improvement in its relations with the people.

Economically there is room for optimism. Given the diverse nature of our economy, I am confident the prime minister will turn the country around as he has done several times before. But he would need the right support from the Malaysian public. We have managed to avoid a recession and we should be able to see the turning of the tide this year.

Over the New Year period, we saw floods in the East Coast. While this is an annual occurrence, the situation was particularly bad in Pahang this time around. The Sultan of Pahang is to be commended for taking personal charge of

the situation and for showing that he and the government care.

I was in Pekan on New Year's Day and noted that much was down to make the situation of those affected as comfortable as possible. Rice and other foodstuffs were distributed and there are plans to assist the needy in some specific areas, such as preparing their children for school and helping those who have lost their livelihoods to the floods. Kudos to all those who have provided their energies, including the people's representatives who reached out to the victims.

Internationally, however, the world appears to be in not too good a shape. This year may well turn out to be a year of wars and conflicts. Apart from the India-Pakistan schism and the Palestinian issue, we have the next phase of the Afghanistan problem, and possibly an attack on Iraq. If the Americans do decide to move against Iraq, this could well result in a major divide between Islamic countries and the West. The September 11 attacks provided the US the *casus belli* to finish what they have always wanted to do, which is to deal with Iraq and those countries that pose a threat to their allies in the Middle East.

In Southeast Asia, things are still very much domestically-driven, and this year we will continue to see more of this domestic strife in our region. But we should count our lucky stars that we live in relative peace. As I had stated last week, peace is not natural; it is man-made.

In other words, we can lose the peace that we are enjoying. History has shown that once you lose it, it will be difficult to re-establish. Therefore, we should occasionally remind ourselves of the fortunate circumstances that we are in, and not take things for granted. Let us then allow prudence to prevail, and not be ruled by emotions. As Sir Humphrey of the British comedy series, *Yes, Minister*, once

said, "It is better to be heartless than mindless." I do wish that my predictions on the international arena are wrong, and that we will have more of that ever-elusive peace.

Towards a single whole

The Sun | July 2, 2000

THE RECENT ANNOUNCEMENT by Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, the current Minister of Defence, on the upgrading of the chiefs of the Navy and Air Force was most symbolic of the entry of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) into the 21st century. It was momentous news for it showed that the service was able to leave the past behind and progress with the times.

It also reflects the service's commitment to truly modernise itself. It is time that the Malaysian forces move to adopt a much more united service, one that would reflect professionalism. Ever since the creation of the individual three services, the development of the armed forces has been biased in favour of the army, considering the nature of the threat in the country. In 1948, with the declaration of the Emergency, the army was given primacy as the threat came from communist guerrillas.

With counter-insurgency operations including activities such as search and destroy missions, as well as large scale land operations against communist strongholds, the army was rightly given priority in terms of budget, equipment and size. As the threat from communism continued right until 1989 when the peace accord was signed, this trend was very much continued.

Although periodically there were potential threats emanating elsewhere, namely from outside, it was always in tandem with the development of the army. Over the years, as the army garnered a larger share of the senior

appointments, it was considered to be a senior service and this was reflected in the rank structure of the armed forces.

The most obvious was the inequality in the positions of the service chiefs. The chief of the army, at one time referred to as the Chief of the General Staff, was a four-star; whereas his counterparts in the navy and the air force had three stars each. The top appointment to the post of the Chief of the Defence Forces is a four-star, thereby giving the army a head start for this pinnacle position. Not surprisingly, the army had always held this position until recent times.

With the end of the cold war in the late 1980s, the armed forces embarked on a modernisation programme, presided by Najib, then also Minister of Defence. This programme has several aspects, namely, the acquisition of more sophisticated military assets, a doctrinal change, moving from counter-insurgency to one that is predicated on conventional warfare, as well as the restructuring of the armed forces. The last aspect has a number of objectives, top of which is to transform the armed forces into a more tri-service force. This meant a move towards more joint appointments, which would see a congenial atmosphere in the force.

There were several important landmark changes. One of the most significant was the appointment of the Chief of Staff, a position hitherto held by the army. It followed was a rotation, which was thought to be the best system. Another change was in the appointment of the first ever non-army commandant to the Armed Forces Defence College, the highest institution of military learning in the country. What was interesting was the discussion of the possibility of upgrading the positions of the chiefs of the navy and the air force to the same level as that of the army. However, when the then-Minister of Defence left, the discussion died down.

The recent announcement should be welcomed as it reflects the changing times. To begin with, the nature of warfare has changed. Today, technology has outweighed the importance of numbers. In other words, qualitative over quantitative. While the position of the army remains critical and crucial, the significant roles of the other two services have increased.

Air power, for instance, has become a critical factor and in some circumstances it even plays a determinant role. That is why modern armed forces have within the order of battle, impressive air capability, whether playing defensive or offensive roles.

The nature of threats has also changed. In previous decades, threats were less unpredictable. At least during the cold war, you basically knew where the potential threats lay. Today, threats could emanate from anywhere, as the recent hostage-taking crisis at Sipadan indicated. In other words, the wisdom of a more consolidated and tri-service orientation has become more relevant. As modern battles have shown, there is no such thing as a single fighting service anymore.

Such a change is inevitable and should never be seen as a zero-sum game. At the end of the day, what is important is that the job gets done and it does not really matter who does it. The coordination among the services must be stressed and each service must look beyond its own — each should be seen as connected and complementing one another and certainly must not be separated.

The services should be less parochial and concentrate more on improvements on their professionalism. Sometimes the case against upgrading is somewhat misplaced, seen and argued from a myopic perspective. However, it is believed that the army will greatly benefit from this move, as it will bring it closer to the other two services.

Gone are the days when the services are seen as separate. They should be regarded as the sum of a whole. All in all, the recent announcement does reflect the coming of age of the armed forces. It augurs well for the armed forces and reflects a high degree of maturity and professionalism.

If peace is desired, then prepare for war

The Sun | November 12, 2000

RECENTLY, there were a number of announcements indicating a renewed acquisition programme for the military. Apart from the slight increase in the defence budget, there have been indications of some of the capital equipment identified for the armed forces. While there will always be certain quarters who will argue that we do not need such equipment or that we do not have enemies, it is critical to bear in mind that national defence is an integral part of a nation state.

It is the duty of every government to ensure that the nation is secure from external aggression. While the nature of the threat faced by Malaysia has evolved over the decades, there are imponderables, such as threats to national sovereignty and integrity that require some conventional capability.

The current military modernisation programme started in the 1980s, when the military embarked on the concept of transforming its essentially counter-insurgency-structured force into a more conventional one. There were three major elements.

The first was to restructure the armed forces, in particular the headquarters of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), which would reflect a much more tri-service orientation.

This had been well implemented, most symbolically demonstrated by the promotion of the chiefs of the navy and air force to four stars, making them on par with their army counterparts. This will clear the way for a possible

non-army chief for the defence forces. Ideally, when the right time comes, this position should be rotational and a fixed term should be determined.

As regards the MAF headquarters, the appointments today reflect a tri-service environment, in most cases based on rotation. It is most encouraging to see the services working together. The philosophy behind the push for a more unified command is predicated on the notion that today's battles and conflicts are no longer restricted to a single service. Today, military operations require the support and involvement of some, if not all, of the elements of the military. It must be recognised that the military has been successful in creating a tri-service environment. It does reflect a high degree of professionalism.

The second aspect is a shift in doctrine, which again reflects a tri-service concept. Exercises have been formulated to strengthen the cooperation and coordination of all the services. Finally, there is the acquisition of assets that would provide a conventional capability to the military. This modernisation programme is comprehensive and takes on a long-term perspective.

We sometimes hear criticism to the effect that as there are no threats around, therefore, it is unnecessary to build the military. However, one needs only to read history to be aware of the nature of conflict. It is clear that conflict has the nasty habit of rearing their ugly heads when one least expects them. In many instances when conflict breaks out, it is often far too late to do anything. That is why one always has to prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

If the argument that no enemy means non-necessity to modernise the military, then the logical conclusion would be that others will also not build up their military capability. However, this is far from happening. One needs only to look at Singapore. Who are Singapore's enemies? Malaysia?

Indonesia? To us in Malaysia, it is an absurdity to suggest that we pose a threat to Singapore's security. However, one gets the impression that from the island's perspective, there is always a possibility.

I do not want to add anything more to this running debate. However, the point I would like to make is that Singapore takes its security seriously, whether there exists a visible threat or not. In terms of capability, there is little doubt that despite its size, it has one of the most powerful military forces in Southeast Asia. Its recent acquisition of submarines goes to show that the republic places deterrence at the forefront of its defence. If one is to compare the order of battle between Singapore and Malaysia, one finds a serious gap in favour of our southern neighbour.

To me, in terms of prestige, we are not able to hold our heads up high. There are many discrepancies between the two forces, not only in terms of sophistication, but also in terms of numbers. For instance, according to the authoritative *Military Balance*, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, Singapore has some 350 light tanks as compared to Malaysia's 26. If people argue that Malaysia is not a 'tankable' country, then can someone please explain the rationale for that kind of figure in Singapore, not including a reported 60 main battle tanks believed to be based in Taiwan for training purposes?

In terms of sea power, Singapore has three submarines and six corvettes armed with Harpoon missiles, not including the recent purchase of Lafayette frigates, as compared to Malaysia, which owns four frigates, six corvettes but no submarines. And in terms of air power, Singapore has roughly 59 F-16s (based abroad as well as on order), as compared to Malaysia's eight F-18s and 17 MiG-29s.

Singapore is a small country that can actually boasts a powerful military force because it believes in creating a credible deterrent. Its citizenry backs the continuous upgrading of its military and, in fact participates in it through its military service. In the case of Malaysia while we rightly do not have a military service concept, relying entirely on professional and reserve forces, Malaysians should be more appreciative of the efforts of the government to modernise its armed force .

To me, there is no doubt that Malaysia needs a credible deterrent force, a force that is, to quote a recent remark by the Minister of Defence, "flexible enough to meet an array of threats ranging from conventional to low-intensity conflicts." In confronting such an uncertain environment, deterrence is arguably the best approach.

I have already argued elsewhere that Malaysians must be more "security conscious". As their role is indirect and therefore limited, they should recognise the sacrifices of the military and allow the government to develop a military force that we can be proud of, as well as being capable of meeting a variety of threats. Let us not be a Rip Van Winkle, sleeping until it is too late to do anything. While there will be those who would go against such an argument, it is worth considering the old military adage that, "If you want peace, prepare for war." Obviously, a balanced development is the best approach, an approach that has long been adopted by the government. A right balance between guns and butter, between defence and development.

Part II
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

Time for Asean to act

New Straits Times | October 18, 1999

WHEN THE AUSTRALIANS took up the leadership in initiating a multinational force in East Timor, Dr Mahathir Mohamad said that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) should instead play a role. His remarks were certainly apt. As the issue involves a member of Asean, its members should be involved and not be indifferent. Indonesia is a prominent member of Asean and has always been considered as a *primus inter pares*. At this point in time, it faces a problem which requires international assistance and what a better organisation than Asean itself to play some kind of role.

In retrospect, although Asean has been discussing security matters within the framework of the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), it has not seriously look at the possible security structure of this organisation. After all, it has never entertained the idea of a military system being developed under its umbrella. The rationale for this has always been the possible suspicion of others as to the motives of such a move. For instance, in the 1980s, it was thought that Vietnam, which was then no part of Asean and was occupying Cambodia, and was in confrontation with Asean, would regard such a development as being targeted against it. Today, it is possible that China could misconstrue a military-type arrangement within Asean as an attempt to confront Beijing. Therefore, such a thought has never been seen as an option, at least, it is believed that the repercussions would be too overwhelming.

However it could well be that Asean should not look to a military and defence framework based on the traditional sense of something like an alliance, but rather it should be geared more towards peacekeeping and one that is not necessarily exclusively Asean. It should, however, be Asean-led. Given the recent East Timor issue, such a development is timely and Asean should consider starting the ball rolling. In this regard, Malaysia has a critical role to play as it has vast experience in peacekeeping operations. Malaysia has always been seen as playing a significant role in the international arena through its efforts in promoting the interests of the developing world. As a result, Malaysia has received much kudos from many countries and multilateral organisations, including the United Nations (UN). As far as the latter is concerned, Malaysia's distinct contributions have been recognised by its membership as a non-permanent member in the UN Security Council, as well as having a Malaysian appointed to the presidency of the 51st UN General Assembly. A Malaysian had actually reached the helm of this world body.

Malaysia has been consistent in its involvement in UN peacekeeping operations. Beginning in 1960, it took part in UN operations in Congo, right until its participation in Bosnia. Malaysia has been represented in all the varieties of UN's military involvement over the decades. They are firstly, the sending of combat troops, essentially battalion groups. Here, Malaysia had sent battalions to Congo, Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia and Bosnia. Secondly, as observers, Malaysian officers have served in places such as the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border, Liberia and Western Sahara. Thirdly, to serve at the UN headquarters, we did have a one-star general serving in New York, as well as a full colonel attached to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) headquarters in conjunction with the Bosnian

peacekeeping operations. A Malaysian three-star general was also appointed as the UN Commander, heading the UN force in Somalia. All in all, Malaysia has an excellent record in serving the UN, especially in its peacekeeping operations. Apart from the army, the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) has also served under the a pices of the The Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) too has been sent as part of UN operations.

It would be fair to state here that withi Asean, Malaysia is the country with the most experience in UN peacekeeping operations. At one point, Malaysia was the seventh largest participating force in the UN. The army has also set up a peacekeeping training centre and this has also received much praise from various quarters. Therefore, Malaysia has a positive role to play in initiating an Asean peacekeeping force.

Such a force need not necessarily be a permanent standing force. It could be a force, designated by participating Asean countries dedicated to undertake peacekeeping operations and missions. This force could be activated at short notice. Regular exercises could be undertaken, in order to sort out what the military refers to as the standard operating procedures (SOPs). By doing so, Asean could significantly contribute not o to the undertaking of its own problems within As , but could also play a role outside the region, especially nder the UN umbrella. It would be the only dedica e rc the world and the UN could certainly draw from this orce. If such a force had existed, there would be no necessity for Australia to initiate a force to be deployed to East Timor. Thus Asean force would be the obvious choice.

Such an Asean force could also be joined by other regional and extra-regional forces, such as Australia. After all, historically, Australia has been involved in the region.

For instance, its soldiers have shed blood defending Malaya. It has for a long time been committed to regional security and stability in the region. It is an active member of the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA), with New Zealand, Britain, Singapore and Malaysia being its other partners. There is no doubt that such an Asean-led and constituted force could well lead to enhancing stability in the region, while at the same time, prevent others from interfering in the region's affairs. It is about time that regional states take care of their own region. In this regard, Malaysia has a good track record and is ready to play a significant role in regional affairs.

When an uprising is not a revolution

The Sun | February 11, 2001

A DANGEROUS TREND is developing in some Southeast Asian nations — as seen in the Philippines and Indonesia — where groups of people take matters to the street and force elected governments out.

To begin with, the two cases mentioned are still experimenting with democracy and both have new constitutions. Taking things to the street is really a step backwards in the development of democracy. In the euphoria, it tends to be forgotten that — “people’s power” — whatever the term may signify — is not necessarily democratic in nature.

For instance, if one million people take to the streets, are they truly representative of a population of, say, 100 million? Certainly not. If this were so, then theoretically any group can overturn an elected government by getting a substantial number of its members out in the streets.

In the case of the Philippines, surely there are mechanisms provided in the Constitution for the ousting of a president who may be under siege. My argument is that you cannot simply take matters into your hands and decide that you represent the majority when there is a serious dispute in terms of numbers.

Societies must be patient when it comes to nurturing democracy. We tend to forget that even the West took a long while going on about it. Even then, disputes still arise — as seen in the recent US presidential election with the alleged disenfranchisement of segments of the African-American community.

In the US, democracy is still relatively new, if we consider that African-Americans were not allowed to vote until the mid-20th century. Women in the UK were in a similar situation and had to fight for their right to vote. The list goes on. It is therefore ironic that these very countries are insisting that democracy be speeded up in newly-emerging states.

When people take matters to the street, it is the rule of the mob really. In such a scenario, things can get out of hand. History is full of such demonstrations turning into full-scale revolutions. The mother of all revolutions, the French, is perhaps the best example of how nasty the situation can become. The revolt was sparked off by the storming of the Bastille in 1789, and resulted in the violent overthrow of the monarchy which had ruled for centuries.

Many studies have been made of the French Revolution, for its moral influence was tremendous. It is interesting to note that the uprising itself was leaderless, and that made matters worse. What ensued were chaos and the rule of the unruly masses.

In comparison, many subsequent revolutions had leaders who provided philosophical, spiritual guidance or physical presence. There was Dr Sun Yat-Sen in the Chinese revolution of 1911, Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the Russian revolution of 1917, Mao Zedong when he took power in 1949, Fidel Castro in the Cuban revolution of 1959 and Ayatollah Khomeini during the Iranian revolution of 1979.

However, the French Revolution did signal a new chapter of political development. The current system in France, more than a century later—its genesis undeniably from the revolution of 1789—provides a strong foundation for subsequent governments and revolutionary movements. It must be stressed that the French Revolution was a true

revolution, resulting in the overthrow of the ancien regime and leading to a totally new system of governance.

In the case of the Philippines, and possibly Indonesia, however, there are already systems in place, imperfect though they may be. Therefore, not giving these systems which others had earlier fought for a chance amounts to denying the due process of law to take its course. The very act of taking things into one's hands is in fact undemocratic.

While some countries, notably in the West, may appear impatient with some non-democracies, it should be realised that democracy has no panacea and does not guarantee of peace and prosperity for all. At the end of the day, it still boils down to the benevolence of the leaders and that is why leadership is so critical to any country.

When some in our midst complain about their lives, pointing to how much things are better in other parts of the world, they do so without really knowing the facts. The blunt truth is that the circumstances of life are no better elsewhere. Those who grumble may even be surprised should they know that the situation is the same in those very countries which often accuse us of wrongdoing.

I believe therefore that we should try to make our lives better and live as best we can. We have to be aware of things that go on abroad, especially in Western societies, so that we may know that they have just as many flaws — not more.

However, I believe we should strive to improve ourselves. In this, we must have some ideals to strive for and to hitch our wagon to that star. And if someone should happen to make a negative point about our country, we should defend it if it ought to be defended. More importantly, we must take note of the criticism and see whether we can improve upon what has been criticised.

A strong nation is one that can withstand and accept criticism. It should learn from such criticism and take the

necessary steps to improve the weaknesses pointed out. In contrast, a weak nation is one that jumps when criticised and loses track of the whole point. Malaysia under Dr Mahathir Mohamad has indeed become a stronger nation and as such our actions should reflect this reality.

Giving Myanmar the break it desperately needs

The Sun | January 7, 2001

DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD has been engaging Myanmar while others have shied away. Malaysia has been extending assistance and support towards that country in its international isolation. Whatever the situation in Myanmar, Malaysia's stand must be recognised and kudos ought to be given for its commitment against the futile notion of isolating a country. Malaysia's continued engagement with Yangon has allowed Myanmar some space in its restricted international arena.

The West has been at the forefront of the isolation of Myanmar. I would question the real motive behind this policy, whether it is based on principles or emotions. To cut to the basics, the stalemate in Myanmar has been caused by the reluctance of the military to give up power to the party that won the elections. Obviously, this could be broadly defined as being against democracy. If indeed this is the situation, then the West's stand against Myanmar is nothing less than double standards. To me, the stand is predicated on emotions rather than something principle .

I see very little difference between the situation in Myanmar and Algeria, where the Muslim party was denied victory when the military staged a coup. It could in fact be argued that some Western countries were quite relieved to see the military taking over. After all, Western clandestine interference in the affairs of other countries is well recorded. The most infamous was the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-backed coup in Chile, where the popular Salvador Allende (1908-1973) was overthrown.

If indeed democracy is the key philosophical goal of Western countries, why is the West inconsistent in its policies? Obviously, much will depend on its own interests.

Therefore, why is Myanmar getting so much flak? Other non-democratic countries get away with it, and in the case of some, are even supported by Western aid.

The answer lies in national interests. Following from this, I would urge Malaysia to continue its good efforts in Myanmar and not to be too bothered with Western pressure, as they are clearly not based on anything concrete. Besides, as argued, it is yet another case of double standards.

I have the privilege of visiting Myanmar several times over the last few years. I find its people to be among the most hospitable I have encountered. They are not only hardworking but also polite.

While the economy has improved over the years with its slight opening, there is great potential in the country. I recall that during my first visit, there were only a handful of hotels of a certain standard. Today, the number has increased; although I believe the situation is not all that good for the operators as the flow of tourism has not improved significantly.

Malaysia and Asean have been trying to get Myanmar into the mainstream of economic development, although the embargo has somewhat restricted the scope and the extent. Not surprisingly, Myanmar has also been cautious in opening up and therefore has tended to be slow.

However, I think what is needed is to put aside political differences and move the economy forward, which will bring benefits to its people — an issue which democracy is supposed to address. The so-called Burmese democrats have been calling for a strict embargo, which I believe will strangle its economy, and in the process its population.

As for the military, it has to face reality and work towards a compromise, although I believe Aung San Suu Kyi has stated that she would punish the military junta in the event that she forms a government. Hence, the stalemate.

I think the time has come for some countries to play a mediating role, rather than merely creating obstacles for the resolution of this seemingly intractable problem.

At the end of the day, both sides must compromise. The following adage has been proven to be the only formula that will ensure a solution: Winners must not win all, and losers must not lose all.

Time for Asia to speak with one voice

The Sun | January 21, 2001

IN OSAKA, Dr Mahathir Mohamad urged the Japanese to lead Asia. He argued that Japan has over the years built sufficient wherewithal to play such a role, whether in terms of technology or economic power. Such a call by the prime minister is most timely as the world is still grappling with an emerging environment following not only the end of the cold war but also a less stable milieu.

There is no doubt that Dr Mahathir's views would find echoes in Japan and the region. However, such calls would pose certain challenges to the government of Japan, in particular the foreign ministry, as well as some quarters in the US. I believe the major point of Dr Mahathir's call is predicated on the lack of leadership in Asia. As a true Asianist, he would like to see Asia stand for itself. The region lacks direction and cohesiveness and so allows external powers to divide and rule its nations. For centuries, Asia has been a battleground for Western interests, often resulting in exploitation and conflict within Asian communities.

One cannot place the blame entirely on the Western quest for power, influence and economic wealth; because Asian communities too contributed to the situation by allowing such interventions to take place. No doubt the resultant internal squabbling aided the West in gaining supremacy.

If one looks at Asia, it is most unfortunate that the region is beset with many potential conflicts resulting from either domestic problems or from bilateral power rivalries.

The sometimes intense and highly emotional Sino-Japanese relationship has caused severe strains in the emergence of a coherent and undisputed regional leadership. The conflicts within the region have prevented Asian countries from reaching a consensus on a regional leader that could provide leadership for Asia.

In the Western world, US preponderance following the end of World War II, coupled with an impoverished Europe provided the golden opportunity for a leading US role to emerge. The US's Marshall Plan sealed European gratitude resulting in a tacit recognition of US global leadership. The ensuing cold war and the further rise of US military power, including its nuclear dominance, made the dependency syndrome even more of a reality.

In Asia too, the US's preponderance was recognised for a long time and due to the cold war, a similar dependency syndrome developed among Asian countries. The Manila Pact, which gave birth to the ephemeral Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), provided the legal framework for military ties to be developed. Malaysia, due to its prudent leadership, has been able to remain independent despite being surrounded with conflict and potential flashpoints.

Japan has remained militarily tied to the US. Many have forgotten that the US occupied Japan following its surrender in August 1945. The new shogun was General Douglas MacArthur and in a most direct manner, he laid the foundation for postwar politics in Japan, with the retention of the Emperor to a reformed institution with a constitutional rather than a divine role. The then prevailing security environment, with the Korean War (1950-1953) and other dangerous situations, provided further reasons for Japan to remain dependent on the US.

To a large extent, Japan has benefited much from the US's protection, including being under its nuclear umbrella. It has often been argued that due to the US's commitment to protect Japan's security, Tokyo was able to concentrate on building its economy. However, over the years, Japan too has built a potent military force with an impressive naval power.

Over the years, Asia has moved on. While there are still many unresolved problems, mostly legacies of history, it would appear that Asia does not appear to be as explosive as before. It could well be that the time is ripe to seriously talk of regional leadership. Therefore, the prime minister's call is most timely. However, there are challenges in seeing reality in his vision.

The first challenge is to seek a consensus. Obviously, there are countries that would reserve their support for Japan. China is one possible country that would have reservations, not only because of its own often antagonistic relationship with Japan, but also due to the fact that Tokyo is tied to the US and that Beijing too has leadership potentials, and even aspirations.

Korea too harbours suspicions, although its US connection could well alleviate its feelings. When one speaks to Koreans, it is pretty obvious that they have little affection for the Japanese, often reminding visitors of their bleak history when they were under the repressive occupation of the Japanese. Although there are quarters in Southeast Asia that would have their own reasons to doubt the Japanese, due mainly to economic reasons, there would be little objection. Therefore, any objection to Japanese leadership would arise from Northeast Asia.

In this respect, Malaysia could actually play a role to bridge the gap that clearly exists in the region. Many would hail Dr Mahathir as a potential regional leader himself.

Over the years, his advocacy of "Asia First" has found resonance across the region.

In my frequent travels to Asian countries, Dr Mahathir is well respected, sometimes even more than their own leaders. He is passionate about Asia and sometimes feels that he is saddened that things have remained the same.

The region today suffers from a lack of coherence and direction, and of course leadership. Asia has no organisation that binds itself, instead you have institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), where one sees a further erosion of the region's consensus. One is sometimes glad that APEC is already yesterday's news, and I believe it will die a natural death. Which means to say that since APEC is ineffective because of its mixed bag of members, the need for a truly all-Asian institution becomes even more pressing.

Perhaps, Dr Mahathir and Malaysia's diplomacy should push for an East Asian summit that could well culminate in the creation of an Asian institution. The current 'Asean+3' seems to be moving towards that direction; although I believe further impetus is required. This summit has to be worked on and I believe Dr Mahathir's stature, commitment and dedication could well see it through.

Exposing the hidden side of Asian values

The Sun | November 5, 2000

RECENTLY, a number of gruesome acts were committed against the young. We have also read about sex-related crimes involving the Malay community, including incest. It is unfortunate such acts have reared their ugly heads in Malaysia. It could well be that they have been around for much longer but are either not reported or that they did not amount to murder.

We have also been reading of what appears to be an increase in child or wife abuse as well as the abundance of unwanted childbirths. Again, especially in the latter, these appear to be increasing among the Malay community, although such statistics may not be disclosed. Although there are many comments that could be made of such incidents, they remind me of the once popular debate on Asian values in the mid-1990s.

While the debate was an attempt to explain why Asian countries were economically successful, although events have proved this to be ephemeral, there were also inevitable comparisons between Asian and Western values. In the debate, the advocates of Asian values attributed their economic success to the strong value system.

There was a sense of one-upmanship against the West, whose decadence was often pointed out. However, it appears that even societies such as Malaysia are not very different from those in the west. While social issues can be openly discussed and tackled in the West, they tend to be obscured in a conservative society like ours, especially as it is shrouded by religion.

Those that are in need of sympathy may well be shut off. It is far better if such issues are addressed in the most humane manner. Victims of unwanted pregnancies especially should be listened to, without the desire to punish. The victim must never be subjected to further victimisation. Society can be cruel to a victim of incest.

Let us revisit the Asian values debate. In fact the debate was flawed conceptually as well as in comparative terms. To begin with, what is different is cultural values not human values, which appears to be the subject of debate. Cultural differences are obvious, as in the use of chopsticks and forks and knives illustrate.

To regionalise human values appears to be impossible, as much depends on the level of modernity that the society is experiencing. Besides, given Asia's diversity, it is impossible to place all of Asia into one value system. Even within Asia, there are many differences, as societies are at different levels of development.

The heart of the issue of the differences in value systems is where one is, in the developmental spectrum. For instance, even in Malaysia, specifically within the Malay community, things have changed considerably, given the rapid economic development we have experienced, over a relatively short period of time. An example this, which the Malay community has better address rather than pretend it does not exist, is the issue of taking care of one's parents. This is considered almost sacrosanct and placing them in old folks' homes is considered unthinkable.

Apparently, statistics suggest that the Malays are beginning to do this, and they tend to belong to the middle-income bracket. While I do not think it is fair for us to judge such acts, the issue must however be addressed. With the pressures of employment and the need for women

to join the workforce, as well as the difficulties in obtaining housemaids, such an option appears to be reasonable.

In the values debate, the Asians often compare their best examples against the worst of the West, thereby making their case look good. There appears to be a lot of assumptions, sometimes based on the negative portrayal of family life in Hollywood movies. Family values is one of the issue. It has been argued that in Asia, family ties are stronger than that in the West where the breakdown of family units is fairly common. While this may be true, it would be an error to generalise.

The family unit in the West is still strong, depending on where it is located. I know of several families that are more close-knit than some that I know of in Kuala Lumpur. In the case of family breakdown, I would like to see the statistics here in Malaysia and to compare them with other societies. We must also bear in mind that the US alone does not in itself represent the West. I know that people in Europe want to distinguish themselves from the Americans.

In Malaysia, at least before the economic crisis, conspicuous consumption was prevalent. While it is a reflection of rapid economic growth in the country, the kind of consumption that apparent, and to a lesser extent is still pervasive, was getting a little over the top. The newly rich live at a level where their compatriots in different parts of the country could not even contemplate, let alone experience.

Sometimes I wonder whether the crisis has taught these people any lessons.

We are beginning to see the erosion of our value system here in Malaysia, and as I have alluded, what is worse is that we do not discuss it in the open. As it can be interpreted that we are losing control of our society, so we do not want to address the issue. The current generation must be

responsible for the future by critically examining what is happening to our society. We should not view things in simplistic terms, especially in labelling values as West and East.

There are some negative values that we should try change. Being indifferent is one. In the 1948 film, *The Winslow Boy*, there was a classic statement about indifference. It goes something like this: "Once allowed through indifference, one act of injustice, the slow poison of indifference, by being convenient, may cripple our rights and liberties."

The criminals who have conducted such inhumane acts must be punished severely. The victims, on the other hand, must be cared for with sympathy. The true test of a society is one that addresses the issues that confronts it, rather than pretend that things are all well when they are not.

Finally, while religion is one avenue to address such issues, it could well be that the answer lies in human sympathy.

Asean must wake up to explosive regional tensions

The Sun | March 11, 2001

IN A RECENT SPEECH, Minister of Defence Mohd Najib Abdul Razak described peace as a period in between wars. His remarks were based on the assessment that there have been countless wars, and not many periods of peace. Even among friends, there have been disputes leading to conflicts — as had happened to two members of Asean, Thailand and Myanmar, when their troops clashed over their common border.

At a time when the region is enjoying peace, things like this happen, sometimes with very little warning. Southeast Asia, notwithstanding internal strife in Indonesia, has been enjoying a prolonged period of peace since the 1980s. In fact, Najib's observation is most applicable to the region as over the last 50 years we have witnessed many more conflicts than we have had peace. Therefore, the current peace may be called a 'period between wars'.

The latest border skirmish could well be considered a conflict, though not on a similar scale as the Vietnam War (1954-1975) which engulfed the whole region. Only a few years of peace followed the fall of Saigon. The region was again at war when the Vietnamese invaded neighbouring Cambodia in December 1978.

What of the current Thai-Myanmar conflict? Most disappointingly, Asean once again appeared to be paralysed, showing its inadequacy in dealing with the core issue of security involving its own members. There is very little point for Asean to appear busy discussing regional security and yet be ineffective when the chips are down.

I have often argued that Asean has been successful because it hasn't done much. If it has not been active, it does not provide an opportunity to assess its effectiveness. It failed during the East Timor conflict recently, and it has failed yet again to make any move towards either mediating the dispute or calling for some negotiations. After all, the conflict does involve member countries.

One understands that Asean has been conducting many meetings and its track-two diplomacy has also been equally active. In as far as the latter group is concerned — sometimes known as the Institutes of Strategic and International Studies Mafia, reflecting its exclusiveness in terms of participation — it appears that they fail to look at the substance, preferring instead to indulge in 'feel-good' activities.

One recalls attending such meetings, and when one is critical of Asean, one is almost ostracised. It is a pity that so-called intellectuals are sometimes not entirely honest with themselves. Track-two is supposed to provide a much more critical viewpoint as a feeder to the first track, which involves officials. If the former becomes a mere spokesperson for the latter, then the whole exercise is futile.

Anyhow, as far as I am concerned, Asean has failed miserably in resolving conflicts, or even to start discussing the issue at hand, in this case the Thai-Myanmar conflict.

Part of the problem lies in its lack of direction. Until today, I am still unsure what exactly Asean is. It is definitely not a union as many of its decisions are not binding, though members are supposedly obliged to comply with them. It does not have a 'supra-structure' to manage its bureaucracy, including the provision of an intellectual back-up; and it also lacks leadership. So long as Asean remains content with the current situation, then one will not see any improvement.

What it needs now is a reappraisal of its direction. It must reinvent itself, and this can be done only if it recognises the necessity to do so and take steps to change and plot its future direction.

It is a real pity that Asean has not been that effective. Many opportunities have been lost where Asean could have shown that it is a dynamic body, flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances.

I was once quoted as saying, "The Asean way got in Asean's way." As the organisation refuses to touch on sensitive issues, it has ignored what I refer to as 'core issues'. In fact, Asean has indulged in looking only at peripheral matters.

It must wake up as some of its members are on the verge of breaking up, especially Indonesia. That country is a time-bomb just waiting to explode. One shudders at the kind of security risk it poses to its neighbours. The impact would be enormous.

What can Asean do? It could do several things.

To begin with, it must assist Indonesia in its peacekeeping as there have been signs of a collapse, and even accusations of the authorities taking sides. Asean must send a clear and unambiguous message to the Indonesian leadership of its concern.

It is in the interest of Asean members that Indonesia remains intact. A breakup of the republic will bring untold problems to the region, far worse than what we saw in the early 1980s following the problems in Cambodia.

Asean must start to rethink soon. If things remain unchanged, its members will see the organisation as being irrelevant. Then it becomes a mere showcase. I am sure that most Asean states recognise this possibility. Therefore, it is in their interests as well as ours to rethink the entity's direction.

Asia today still lacks a coherent regional grouping. However, there are early signs that the 'Asean+3' could well be the forerunner of a regional institution along the lines of Dr Mahathir Mohamad's East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). The idea, conceived more than 10 years ago, illustrates his visionary prowess. Few regional leaders have that sort of long-term vision, looking beyond today's world into tomorrow's.

If we want to remain united within our boundaries, we need to be more so at the regional level. Although Asean appears to provide the cement that bonds us all together, complacency and even evasiveness could render it irrelevant.

Firebrand religious factions pose security risk

The Sun | April 15, 2001

THE recent spate of bombings in southern Thailand has come at the worst possible time. There are just so many issues out there involving Thailand, Malaysia and the rest of region that another problem will only compound the situation. On the economic front, we are all in the midst of an economic recovery, a delicate process which may be derailed with the slowing down of the US economy. Foreign investments are bound to be affected and will usually stay away if the climate appears unstable. Violence such as bombings by dissident groups are a clear no-no for them.

On the political front, Thailand just had its elections, with a new and controversial prime minister at its helm. Thailand had also clashed with Myanmar over their common border and this appears to be a precarious situation. The latest bombing will no doubt pose a major challenge to the Thai government as well as its military, which, since their withdrawal from the political scene, have marched back to their barracks and have tried to be more professional.

Who are the people behind the bombs? At the moment, there are different interpretations. According to Thai officials, three groups had conducted the bombings jointly: the National Revolutionary Front, the *mujahideen* and the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO). The media however, appears to have zoomed in onto PULO only. On its part, PULO has so far denied its involvement.

There is a twist to all this. It was suggested that the three groups had met and planned the bombings in Kuala

Lumpur. Obviously, this complicates matters as it will drag Malaysia into the internal matter of Thailand's. PULO has been around for quite some time and the Thais have often linked it to Malaysia, suggesting that some quarters in Malaysia have given assistance to this secessionist group. One suspects that this latest link, if it is true, is something that the Thais have often made much fuss over. Such accusations could also have been made to undermine Bangkok-Kuala Lumpur bilateral relations.

Despite their closeness, relations between Thailand and Malaysia have encountered some problems; although they may be no more than normal issues involving neighbours that share common borders. Apart from territorial disputes (the legacy of history) as well as disagreements over fishing areas, there has also been a conflict of opinion over many regional and international issues. The Thai media has often been critical of developments in Malaysia. To be fair to them, they are equally if not more hard-hitting on their own politicians. The new democracy in Thailand has opened up the Thai media.

There are also many positive elements in the relationship, the fostering of people-to-people ties as well as good political understanding. However, it appears that the new set of challenges have been brought about by a much more liberal Thai political environment. One case in point is the sponsorship by the Thai government of the concept of "constructive intervention" to Asean. While this needs further examination and qualification, it strains to the limit the almost sacrosanct Asean principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

Part of this has to do with the Thais making comments and observations over developments in Myanmar. This was also due partly to the very able Thai foreign minister, Surin Pitsuwan. I have the privilege of getting to know him and he

has my full respect and admiration for his ability, eloquence and intelligence. With a doctorate from Harvard, he projects Thailand well in the international arena; although as I understand it, he was often accused of being very pro-US.

It would appear then that there is a dangerous trend emerging in this region. If allowed to remain unchecked, could well spell some instability. This is about religious-based groups making use of their religions to legitimise their actions and gain sympathy as well as to conduct violent acts with fuzzy objectives. We are not sure whether this has to do with political or religious beliefs, or is all just a cover-up for financial gain.

We have seen this in the southern Philippines, with pirates, sometimes under the guise of Islam, conducting criminal acts and claiming doubtful political affiliations. The Moros have been implicated in this, although it appears that this could be the work of splinter groups. We then have the current resurgence of southern Thai Muslims, whose activities could well sustain a negative portrayal by the media.

Unfortunately, even in Malaysia, we had a glimpse of the threat posed by Al-Ma'unah. Kudos to the armed forces for their successful conclusion of what could well have turned out into, something disastrous. The level and cool-headed leadership of the Minister of Defence proved to be invaluable to the success of the operation. It is critical that the government takes all the necessary measures to combat this menace.

What else can be done for us to reverse this negative trend? To begin with, we must support the government when it deals with such groups. Malaysia is a peaceful country and we should never allow minority groups,

sometimes consisting of only a handful of people, to jeopardise the country's stability.

Secondly, we should remain vigilant and be more civic-minded, and report events that appear suspicious, especially when they involve groups that advocate violence. There are many lessons that we could all learn from the Sauk incident.

Thirdly, there must be cooperation among the authorities of our neighbouring countries given the porous nature of the border areas.

I started off by saying that the region is facing a lot of issues that need careful attention. This obviously requires a much more delicate approach and at the same time public support is needed. During such challenging times, we need to remain united and a closer rapport must exist between the government and the people.

Religion has little to do with unrest in southern Philippines

The Sun | December 2, 2001

WHILE the world's attention was focused on the Taliban's downfall, a rebellion in southern Philippines gripped the headlines in this part of the world. As the Americans were hunting down Osama bin Laden, Manila was likewise seeking renegade Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leader Nur Misuari.

The timing is most unfortunate as it would appear that yet another Muslim has done it again. Actually, religion has little to do with the unrest in the Philippines as in the Afghan scenario.

In both cases, it is about power. Minister of Defence Mohd Najib Abdul Razak was correct when he pointed out that this was not about Islam and that Malaysia was committed to sending Nur Misuari back to the Philippines.

I do hope that Malaysians, particularly the Malays, will be sophisticated enough to appreciate this distinction, rather than seeing Nur Misuari as a Muslim leader fighting for Islam. Too many people these days use religion to promote their own self-interests. In Malaysia, we have political parties that use the term 'Islam' in their names and are quite happy to exploit it to achieve their political ambitions.

When Nur Misuari was detained, the Malaysian government was firm in its decision to deport him. However, it took some time as legal technicalities must be complied with. The decision is based on the international norm of non-interference in the domestic affairs of another country, a practice regarded as sacrosanct in diplomacy.

The complication arose when Manila hinted it would prefer Nur Misuari to be detained in Malaysia. While one can understand the rationale for such a preference, there are problems in implementing such a move. The last thing we need is to create an embarrassing precedent for others to emulate. I do hope the situation will be resolved soon since some ambitious people are just waiting to play the religious card.

That brings to me to the state of the Opposition in the country, as they seem to be falling apart. The conventional adage that opposition parties come together only during elections and fall apart soon thereafter seems to be proving itself yet again. It goes to show that they have lost their momentum.

To begin with, the parties involved are really strange bedfellows. Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia), which has the largest number of opposition seats, does not reflect the country's racial composition and is too parochial for most Malaysians.

The Afghan conflict has shown that it is basically a conservative set-up with a propensity towards extremism. The party's leaders even called on its members to declare a *jihad* and fight alongside the Taliban.

The bottom line is that the average Malay is moderate and does not want to be involved in activities that will jeopardise his livelihood. We have and will continue to coexist with everyone.

I have always believed that Malays generate a good image of Islam, with the exception of a few. I know that by making such a statement I will be condemned by those few. The point is that we cannot really allow them to take control of the destiny of so many. The time is more than ripe for us to make a stand against them.

Many observers have already foreseen what is presently happening in Afghanistan. True to form, the Afghans are fighting among themselves to a brutal end. While the Americans are busy looking for the elusive Osama, the killing continues.

I sometimes wonder: when Muslims fight each other, with everybody declaring a *jihad*, who actually goes to heaven? Only Allah the Almighty knows.

There are other threats looming. The Americans may extend the conflict to other Muslims territories, especially Iraq, which is already under threat.

Washington is slyly threatening neighbouring Muslim nations against giving sanctuary to Osama. I am sure the order to the American forces in the field is to kill rather than capture him for the latter would be inconvenient.

I believe Washington is ready to admit that democracy can be most inconvenient at times. This whole exercise demonstrates that despite its rhetoric on democracy and human rights, the US still subscribes to good old *realpolitik*—and the Machiavellian notion of the end justifying the means.

Mutual suspicions, an obstacle to Asian unity

The Sun | August 20, 2000

WHILE there has been much discussion on the need for a regional organisation that will represent Asia, such an idea is far from nearing fruition. On the contrary, there appears to be no consensus on how such a body could emerge.

Surprisingly, this is not due to some external influence, say, from some Western countries, but rather from suspicions within the region. Sometimes it appears that we trust the West more than we do ourselves; hence the various security linkages with some Western powers and yet almost none within Asia. Hence, the lack of a consensus on such an exclusive regional body in the region.

There are some regional organisations that have represented the region and most of them would argue that Asean is probably the best. However, while the organisation has gained much strength over the years, there is much debate as to its effectiveness. Some argued that it is only effective on paper but hardly so in terms of substantive actions. The organisation seems to be bogged by excessive rhetoric, and there are a number of reasons for this.

First and foremost, it is not a binding organisation. As such, member states may agree publicly on some issue but do not follow up with actual support in practice, thereby stalling its development. There is a clear need for a critical look at the organisation's status.

Does it subscribe to regional integration? If so, what is its ultimate form? Will it become like the European Union (EU) and the European Community (EC), with all their institutions such as the European Parliament and a common

currency? The EC has a huge bureaucracy, with a complex mixture of various European nationals.

As Asean is unclear of its direction today, it gives the impression that it is not yet serious enough to warrant its members to accord too much importance to it, especially in terms of policy formulation. This has led to members pursuing a dual-track approach: one that is Asean-led and another based on national interests and bilateral relations. Things would be acceptable if both approaches were consistent with one another. However, more often than not, they aren't.

It is very difficult to see rapid development emanating from Asean initiatives when they affect bilateral relations. Obviously, states that are affected will not be willing to play ball. Take the Malaysia-Singapore relations for instance. For quite a while, relations between the two countries have seen little improvement and a number of issues remain unresolved. Such a stalemate has caused much unhappiness and dissatisfaction to both sides. As bilateral issues have enormous impact on both sides, Asean matters may not necessarily be all that critical.

Even though you may get a consensus within Asean, individual states know that the consensus may mean little in practical terms. It may look good publicly, but things get much more difficult at the bilateral level. In other words, despite the cordial atmosphere prevailing within Asean, it has not really influenced bilateral relations.

Unfortunately, bilaterally there are many outstanding issues and much suspicion within the region. An examination of military ties will reveal the extent of such suspicion within the group, and the apparent greater trust of external powers, particularly with Western countries.

While there are several bilateral and even multilateral military exercises within the region, none are binding, as

there are no collective defence agreements among Asian powers.

The time could well be ripe for the top military brass of Asean countries to meet regularly to exchange views that may eventually lead to some form of defence arrangement.

The list of military arrangements with western powers goes on. Recently, the once bilateral military exercises between Thailand and the US, known as Cobra Gold, was extended to include other countries. At least there were invitations to other regional countries to participate and we saw a number doing so.

Can't Asian countries initiate something on our own, instead of relying on others? Do we have to view our neighbours with suspicion and Western countries as protectors?

Such suspicion spills into non-military matters, including economic issues. The setting up of an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) is such an example. While one can blame some Western countries for putting the pressure on Asian countries, why do we need to succumb to them in the first place? Obviously, the reason is that we are dependent on them. However, the difficulties go beyond mere external pressure; it boils down to rivalries from within. There are several questions that need to be answered with regard to AMF.

First of all, the mechanism. What would be its nature and role? Then there are the issues of membership. Will it include India or even Taiwan? Then there is the issue of leadership. While members should have equal status, there is a need for a *primus inter pares*. Should it be Japan? Will China block such a move? What about South Korea? Finally, there is a need to establish some kind of relationship with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While such

an idea has surfaced, it appears that there is no consensus on how to get it moving.

Finally, we are beginning to see a number of Asean countries that tend to be much more critical in their approach, mainly as a result of the democratic process in their own countries. They have tended to highlight a number of issues that will challenge the very existence of the organisation. The issue of the right of states to intervene in practical terms, to make comments on their neighbours, is one such explosive issue. This will no doubt aggravate the situation.

As Asean and East Asia face the challenges of globalisation, it may well be time for regional countries to look at the bigger picture and less on parochial issues that could hinder regional development.

Finally, as borders disappear, the divide within the region and between regions will also be eroded. As such, the notion of them and us will become less relevant. Let us take a much more optimistic picture and as the late Chinese statesman Deng Xiaoping once said, "Let us put aside the hindrances and move forward."

Strategic interests may quell storm over US spy plan

The Sun | April 8, 2001

THE STANDOFF between the Chinese and the Americans over the latter's aircraft is reminiscent of similar incidences during the tense period of the cold war. A number of famous events come to mind, such as the Pueblo incident in 1968, which involved an American spy ship captured by North Korean patrol boats. Tensions were high when the two superpowers or their proxies clashed. In the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, the world was brought to the brink of a cataclysmic nuclear confrontation.

What can we make out of the incident involving Beijing and Washington? To begin with, while the two powers may be competitors, they are not adversaries. Their relationship has been described in the past as a strategic partnership, even though at present, President George W. Bush tends to place emphasis on traditional allies, rather than new ones.

Anyhow, one cannot compare the relations between them with those that characterised the Americans and the Soviets. The latter were enemies, ideologically locked in confrontation, each with the ability to destroy the other many times over. Their missiles were constantly aimed at each other and both were engaged in the biggest arms race known to man. People-to-people contacts between the two countries were also restricted.

In comparison, the US and China's relations are generally good, especially in trade. In defence, while there is tension over Taiwan, there is a huge gap in the military balance between the two in favour of the Americans. The Chinese does not have the capacity to catch up with the

Americans. Besides, Beijing is too prudent to spend too much money on defence and to neglect economic development—which the Soviets did much to their regret years later when their own people turned against them.

This affair raises the issue of whether the two countries are indeed adversaries, and whether their adversarial competition will grow. What is the nature of their relationship? The economic factor notwithstanding, there is also the ideological factor, although its significance is no longer critical.

The Chinese are still under communist rule, although Mao Zedong would certainly disapprove of what has become of the People's Republic he created in 1949. It is almost certain that China would never ever revert to the days of the Cultural Revolution (1966). Today, ordinary Chinese are more concerned with fashion and imitating Western lifestyles than reading the Red Book or the works of Marx and Engels.

What about the military? Although the US and its allies in East Asia, particularly Japan, have identified China as a potential threat, Beijing's military capability is far inferior compared to the Americans. The Chinese have only one Ballistic Missile Submarine (SSBN) capable of carrying 12 missiles, whereas the US has a total of 432 Submarine-launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) in 18 Ohio-class SSBNs.

The complication is over Taiwan and the security concerns of its allies, notably Japan. This makes the US committed to the region. The scenario enacted over the last few days resembled that between adversaries. However, the reality does not fit in with what transpired. Truth is, if ever an aircraft violates the air space of another country, there are certain procedures to be followed.

When the American plane landed at Hainan airport, it was in distress. If the two countries are in a state of war, the crew will be automatically classified as prisoners of war (POWs), and the plane falls under Chinese control.

However, both countries are not at war, even if their behaviour suggests otherwise. Does the Chinese have the right to detain the crew and seize the aircraft? Friendly countries do not do this to each other, nor do they spy on each other.

Surveillance is quite normal; reconnaissance flights are conducted by most countries. These flights occur in international space and do not violate the air space of others. In this instance, the plane has been dubbed a spy plane, but then it is not quite the kind of spy plane used in the cold war, such as the U-2 and the SR-71 Blackbird which can fly at high altitudes over enemy airspace. Reconnaissance aircraft are regarded as *bona fide* eyes and ears, and they do not fly in another's airspace but in international space.

In pre-satellite days, spy planes were frequently used. A similar incident occurred in May 1960, when the Soviets brought down an American U-2 plane flying deep in Soviet territory on a mission to take photographs of Soviet military facilities.

The Americans thought that by flying high, they were immune from missile attacks but a Soviet SA-2 missile shot down the plane. The pilot, Gary Powers, was captured and did not take the cyanide pill that was issued to him. The Soviets cleverly got President Eisenhower to deny publicly that US spy planes were authorised. When it was revealed otherwise, the US president was shown to be a liar. It was a Soviet diplomatic triumph.

In the present case, the Americans have deployed warships to the area. This is classic gunboat diplomacy. Obviously, the US is sending a clear message to China that

it has the force and may flex its muscles. However, the question is whether this is worth an escalation that could lead to conflict.

At present, Washington has a new president eager to prove his toughness. Republican presidents have a reputation of being a little more gung-ho. After all, Bush's father did preside over the Gulf War.

However, it may all boil down to an apology. Still, if the Chinese can prove that the American plane had violated Chinese air space, then the US must face the consequences. However, if it is proven otherwise, it would be interesting to see how the incident turns out.

Throughout all this tension, one wonders where the UN stands. Obviously, the UN needs to be careful in interfering with the Americans, especially when its secretary-general needs Washington's support for the extension of his tenure.

We should all learn from this standoff for it can happen to any country. While we talk about peace, this episode confirms that war and conflict still lurk.

Japan must play an independent global role

The Sun | January 13, 2002

MALAYSIA'S relations with Japan have generally been good and cordial and there are really no major disputes between them. In fact, since independence there has been a steady increase in the level of ties.

Japanese premier Junichiro Koizumi's visit to Malaysia is an affirmation of this relationship. Before leaving for this trip, Koizumi gave a press conference articulating the rationale for his five-country visit to Asean. There are a number of interesting points here.

Koizumi plans to launch an economic initiative that will create a strategic advantage for the economies of the region. It has been argued that it is initiated in view of the rise of China. No doubt, there has been a latent and even an overt power rivalry between Japan and China. Historically, ties between them have been hostile and relations remain highly emotional and sometimes high-strung.

However, at the official and political level the rivalry is often intense. One level of competition is to get Asean countries to be more supportive of one or the other. Due to the stagnation of the Japanese economy, the longest since the end of the Pacific War, Tokyo has lost a little of the shine it once had.

Instead, we saw the rise of an economically powerful China. We will see an intensification of the rivalry in this field in years to come. It is clear that Tokyo, under Koizumi, is trying to get back the reins of influence in the region and to ensure that China does not get the upper hand.

While there is economic rivalry, the basic problem lies in political and strategic issues. The Chinese still harbours deep suspicions about the Japanese ever since the latter invaded and 'ruled' or even colonised parts of China.

There have been countless Chinese movies that have used this historical fact as its backdrop. When I attend conferences abroad and discuss regional ties with scholars from Tokyo or Beijing, I always sensed that both the Chinese and the Japanese have this built-in 'distrust' and even 'hatred' in them psychologically. When I am in Tokyo I am often asked why Malaysia does not regard China as a threat. My answer often is that Malaysia as a matter of principle does not regard nor refer to any country as a threat. History has shown us that doing so could well lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It has often been argued that it is the US that has kept the two countries in check, despite the alliance framework between Tokyo and Washington.

The American military is present in Japan, being represented by the US naval presence in Yokosuka and the United States Air Force (USAF) in various parts of the island as well as the army. The Americans are committed to defend Japan in the event of an attack.

However, America is aware that it has to establish good relations with China, which according to some observers, is already one of the convenient enemies of the US. There have been occasions where the US has had a period of good relations with Beijing and one senses that at these times, Tokyo feels a little insecure. The latter appeared so when President Bill Clinton described US-China relations as strategic during his second term.

Although the language used was ambiguous, it did generate debate on the likelihood of a shift in the geopolitics of the Far East. However, there is also some degree of

healthy competition between the Chinese and Japanese in Asean and this latest trip by Koizumi in the radar screen of the regional states is evident of this.

There is much pride at stake here as China's economy is not only stable, though there is still a danger of it going belly-up, but that it has an enormous potential to be one of the largest economies in the world.

This occurs at a period where there is an erosion of Japan's prestige abroad. This means that China is seen as a far more credible leader than Japan can ever be. At least with China, you will know that it's far more willing to be neutral than take sides. Although China too is sometimes pressured by a multitude of factors, but when it comes to strategic matters, it tends to exercise a large degree of independence. Perhaps Japan is trying to shed its image as an unsinkable US carrier. Many of us would like to see Japan play a greater role in the international and regional arena, one that projects a far more independent stance.

In the same interview before Koizumi's departure, he praised Dr Mahathir Mohamad, especially for his leadership abilities. I believe his admiration for his Malaysian counterpart reflects a frustration that many Japanese have regarding the lack of similar leadership in Japan. This paralysis of leadership in Japan over the last decade has weighed down the nation. The nation longs for a strong leadership that is able to provide stability.

Sometimes, I feel that others are far more appreciative of us than we are ourselves. In the Malaysian context, political longevity at the very top level is definitely an asset that ensures the continued development of this country.

During Koizumi's visit to Malaysia, education, among other things, appeared to have an important place on the agenda. The Look East Policy, which was once the symbol of the relationship between the two countries, has ensured

that Malaysians have a better appreciation of different economic and administrative models and systems.

In the current scenario, there is a feeling that this programme, which has benefited us, will need to be re-examined and given a new form and emphasis. I believe this visit could see this relationship entering a new, rejuvenated phase.

Lame duck without an absolute mandate

The Sun | November 19, 2000

MANY were anticipating for one of the closest fought US presidential elections ever. It soon became clear, however, that things were going to be more complicated than expected. This episode shows the presidential election with warts and all.

There were irregularities and discrepancies over the process, reminiscence of elections associated with developing countries, but certainly not with the supposed champion of democracy. The revelation was shocking to Americans as it was to everyone around the world. Whoever emerges as the winner will be a lame duck, as his victory will always be in dispute; his decisions will always be questioned and his wisdom, if any, will be disputed.

A British tabloid suggested that Governor George W. Bush used to take only minutes to decide whether a prisoner lives or not as his state of Texas has the highest number of executions in the US. The paper argued that if he wins, he will have the power to destroy the world and disputed his fitness to wield such enormous control.

Ironically, the new president — whoever it may be — will not really have the full mandate of the American people, let alone of the world. While the media will constantly remind him and the people of his weak position, people, alas, have short memories.

What can the world do to prevent such a man from exercising his powers; a man without a real mandate from his people? Sadly, nothing much, as the restraint has to come from within the American system itself.

The other issue is the American fixation with 'championing' democracy. The US allows for itself a self-appointed role as the defender of democracy. Will the new president have the moral standing to be associated with such a noble cause? Picture him spouting democracy when he himself is mired amidst allegations of power abuse in Florida and other states.

Developing countries have often been accused of corruption of all sorts. It is about time that we too accuse the US in like vein. US newspapers had reported of smelling a rat in Florida, as its governor is Bush's brother. There were countless also accusations of supposedly independent officials in Florida supporting Bush. The question of accepting the role of the US leadership comes to mind. If it is disputed within the US itself, one cannot possibly imagine the rest of the world accepting it. So, if this is the case, what can we expect from the new US president?

Once the issue of who is going to be the new leader of the American people is resolved, then the new president will have to appoint his team. One of the advantages of the US system is that the president can appoint anyone whom he feels is competent to any appointment, although the Senate will need to ratify them. This means that a US president can appoint professionals to the job. That is why one of the top positions, the Secretary of State, has a catalogue of very able personalities. Once his team is formed, then policy advisers will concentrate on putting their so-called promises into practice. However, there is a great difference between making promises when you are not in office and when you are in it. It is expected that there will be a large degree of continuity or change in US policy, especially in the international arena. While the biggest changes will most likely take place in the domestic front, one should expect much of the same in foreign affairs.

However, I think we (denoting every country) should adopt a less pliant attitude *vis-à-vis* the US as compared to before. If the new US president talks about democracy, we should remind him of his own precarious position and the flaws of the US system. If he questions the extent of democracy in a particular country, we should also be able to do likewise with his own country. In fact, I believe we should send a team of experts to conduct research on the American presidential election in order to quip ourselves when we criticise the US on its double standards.

In the past, the US had practised double standards in its policies towards democratisation around the world — for instance, by punishing Myanmar and closing an eye towards pro-US regimes that are not democratic, then this time around, we should be able to hit them on their home front.

However, it is worth noting that while we see the weaknesses of the US system in the election, we also see its strengths. While the system revealed its own flaws, we also witnessed the American media playing its role. We witnessed the American system reacting to the irregularities by soliciting opinions, often expressed in a diversity of views. Under the notion of freedom of the press, things are revealed and negative aspects highlighted. In subsequent months, these issues will continue to haunt the winner. So, while there will be those who would smile seeing the current events in the US, it should not further justify the repression of peoples as well as the restriction of the freedom of expression and speech elsewhere.

If anything, we should strive for a better system — one that takes cognisance of the human desire to live in peace and prosperity, and to enjoy the dignity of being a human being with all its freedoms.

Flawed election takes shine off US democracy

The Sun | December 17, 2000

THE 2000 US presidential election is finally over. No doubt the ramifications of what I would term as the electoral fiasco will haunt the system for years to come.

I'm neither a supporter of George W. Bush or Al Gore, but what is most worrying is that the fundamental democratic notion that every vote cast must be counted was not carried out to the fullest satisfaction. It really does not matter whether the votes were counted electronically or manually, but they should be counted. If the candidate has asked for a recount, then a recount should be convened.

I cannot really understand why Bush was against the recounting of the votes. There were concerns expressed that if manually done the margin of error and of human intervention would be greater. But this argument should be weighed against the fundamental notion that all votes cast must be counted. If either party claims any discrepancy, then I believe it would be against natural justice not to address them.

In the Malaysian electoral system, the candidate could ask for as many recounts as he or she wants, until he or she is finally satisfied. It is only when the candidates are fully satisfied will the winner be announced. Therefore, in the US case, there is obviously a discrepancy.

Reports of voters not being allowed to vote or that their names were missing in the electoral register is another area that warrants attention. All in all, it was most disappointing. However, this situation will have a bearing on the presidency.

There is also the question of Gore winning the popular vote and yet not managing to emerge the winner. In fact, more Americans who voted actually preferred him to Bush — and yet he lost the presidential election. Obviously, the US electoral system will need to be re-examined in terms of its philosophical foundation. As far as I am concerned, the declared winner is not the real winner as his legitimacy is questionable. As a result, the US presidency will suffer because it lacks moral statute. I will certainly question the mandate of President Bush and, therefore, his policies.

The electoral disaster will also affect the US's international moral standing. Over the decade, the US has championed democracy and has really made this a major thrust in its foreign policy. In other words, the state of democracy of a nation could well determine the level of relations between the nation and the US. Obviously, Washington is pragmatic enough to practise double standards in the implementation of its policies. For instance, its support of Saudi Arabia, despite it being a monarchical system, is devoid of any effective Western-style democratic institutions. Given the US's own weakness in democracy, revealed to the world through the recent presidential election, I believe many countries should now ignore its policies towards democracy. Maybe the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) or any developing world international organisations should send observer teams to see whether future US presidential elections are democratic. Certainly, the E.U. should send their own team.

The other revealing thing is the not-so-independent US judiciary. It is amazing that various elements in the US have accused Malaysia's judiciary of being not independent. It is so obvious that the US judiciary is partisan to the party that appointed it in the first place.

I must admit that I was somewhat taken aback by the verdict, which reflects the composition of the highest level of the US judiciary. How dare the Americans accuse countries like Malaysia of having a judiciary that is not independent? I think that from now, we should merely ignore such criticisms from the US, for recent events have shown that the US certainly has no moral standing to play such a righteous role in the international arena.

However, having said this, the episode in the US presidential election does not mean that we can leave things in Malaysia the way they are and that it should condone things that are not right in this country. On the contrary, we should work hard to improve our institutions. In other words, just because the system in the US stinks, it does not mean that we should go the same direction. It will be interesting to see how the new US president will carry out his duties, especially when the media as well as the other groups, including the Democrats, will be close at hand to remind him of his lack of legitimacy.

Over the years, there have been many descriptions of the US presidency. For instance, it was once called the Imperial Presidency. This was when the president was powerful and expanded US influence globally, particularly with its interventions. I guess the Bush presidency could well be described as the Illegitimate Presidency. I suppose the 2000 presidential election will be studied by many, including those in academe. There are many lessons to be learnt from it from many perspectives. Overall, it shows that every country, big or small, will have its own fair share of problems.

Big does not mean right; if anything, it shows that the small can afford to ignore the shouts of the big, especially if the big has lost its moral stature. I suspect many would come to this same conclusion. We will need to wait and see.

Liberal world trade is the hand that feeds us

The Sun | April 1, 2000

MOST PEOPLE have begun to brace themselves for the impact of a slowdown in the American economy. Kudos must be given to the government for taking pre-emptive measures in order to contain, if not avoid, the impending knock-on effects on our own economy. This goes to show that the Malaysian economy is not just intertwined with America's, but is dependent on it. I recall that years ago, when I was in school, we were told that when America sneezes, Malaysia catches a cold. It appears that hasn't changed.

The downturn of the American economy is also illustrative of the cyclical nature of economic growth. During the 1980s, the Asian economies were on the rise, whereas the US economy was going through a period of stagnation. At the height of Japan's bubble economy for instance, the Japanese were buying properties in the US and Europe as well as purchasing famous paintings, sometimes at many times their market value then. When the crisis struck the Asian countries, the American economy was experiencing a prolonged economic boom. Today, the downturn of the American economy will have a great impact on the Asian economies, as the latter are in a critical stage of recovery.

The US is Malaysia's largest trading partner, while we are the US' 11th biggest. As such the economic relations between the two countries must be regarded as critical. As the US is the largest destination for our exports, this market is crucial to our economic survival. There is nothing wrong

with being dependent on another economy, and this has always been a feature of the Malaysian economy.

Decades ago, when Malaysia's economic survival hinged on the golden twin products of rubber and tin, we were at the mercy of the commodity traders and the often-violent fluctuations in the prices of these goods in the world market. Today, although the economic base is being successfully transformed from an agrarian into an industrial one, other kinds of dependency have remained. This however is a common feature shared by many manufacturing economies.

This state of economic affairs does indicate that in today's highly globalised economy, the notion of independence needs to be re-examined. It seems that independence may as well not exist in today's economic vocabulary.

However, it is important that an economy is not too dependent on one market, as in the case of Malaysia, where a slowdown in the electronics sector, for example, will have a profound impact. That is why Malaysian businessmen are encouraged to venture beyond traditional markets and explore new areas. This thinking has led to many trade missions, sometimes led by the prime minister himself, to Africa, Latin America and elsewhere.

The success of these efforts has not exceeded expectations, as much is dependent on the ability of the domestic economies of the new states to absorb Malaysian exports. This means that at the end of the day, the success of Malaysia's diversification programme will depend not so much on Malaysia's export capacity but rather whether the demand for its mainly consumer goods is sufficiently strong in the recipient countries.

There is no denying that Malaysia is a globalising nation, as our economy is dependent on foreign direct

investments and overseas markets for our products. The Malaysian domestic market is far too small to be able to absorb the production level which is rather high. In other words, while Malaysia continues to lament about the process of globalisation, it has benefited tremendously from it. The opening of Western markets has facilitated the steady growth of Malaysia's economy.

In fact, when one takes a look at Malaysia, especially in Kuala Lumpur, many things around us are foreign, even the labour! What does this tell us? To begin with, Malaysia is an international society, with historical ties with the world, especially Europe and the US. I think most Malaysians have no problems with this, as can be seen by the popularity of Western movies and television programmes. Malaysians who can afford it prefer to travel to Europe and the US. Wealthy Malaysians have properties in Australia and elsewhere.

Malaysia has survived economically because of the open world economy. While globalisation appears to have hurt us, it has also brought much benefit to the economy. The jury is still out as to how we should see globalisation. But it appears that the process of globalisation may well take a turn to reflect a much better managed and structured economic balance, if ever this is possible.

While we brace ourselves to face the impact of the American economic slowdown, there is no necessity to panic and listen to the prophets of doom. So long as the Malaysian economy remains dynamic, we will be able to ride out the storm. However, the caveat is that we should remain united in our approach, while being critical in our assessments. It must be pointed out that if one cares to listen to dissenting views, mainly at the periphery, some of them have turned out to be valid. I recall that in 1996, there were already assessments made of the ominous signs that the

economy was not well. As the human body shows, there will be symptoms which warn that if remedies are not taken, then the person will indeed fall sick. In the case of a nation, failure to read the warning signs can result in the economy going belly-up.

Therefore, we should try and listen as much to dissenting views as possible, for sometimes, these views are far more truthful than those who merely please the listeners.

Rivalry defeats Muslim unity

The Sun | October 15, 2000

ON A VISIT to Cambridge recently, Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad touched on the plight of the Muslim world. Most aptly, he voiced his frustrations and unhappiness over the way the Muslims have brought so much misery upon themselves, and in the process losing their ability to focus on the economic development and social mobility of the *ummah*.

One cannot but agree with the premier if one examines the development of the Muslim world, especially over the last fifty years or so. While we may blame others, in particular on past colonial masters, it must be recognised that most Muslim countries have already been independent for decades. We could debate on the finer points of the colonial legacy in terms of the repression of the economic and social development of the people and the impact they will have on future generations. However, on closer scrutiny, the problem lies with the Muslims themselves. Much of the misery suffered was caused by independent Muslim-led governments.

Radical policies have brought about severe economic and societal dislocations, causing many problems. Internal bickering — whether the result of tribal or political rivalries — have accentuated the problem, leading to an almost perennial state of disunity. Obviously, such cracks have allowed foreign elements, which could be other Muslim governments, to take advantage and support warring factions. This has caused many divisions in the Muslim world.

Then, there is the conflict within the Muslim world, either internally or among rival states. The two glaring examples were the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted for some eight years, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The former conflict saw the involvement of various powers, each trying to gain influence and footholds on their allies.

We saw these two enemies consuming not only huge amounts of their wealth for the purchase of weapons but also the suffering of their people. This long-drawn-out conflict brought untold misery to the two countries and the responsibility must rest on the shoulders of the two countries.

When Kuwait was invaded, it led to the ensuing intervention by the US on the side of the oil-rich gulf state. Many in the Muslim world condemned such a move. What was unfortunate was that we did not see that the opportunity for foreign intervention was actually created by the Iraqi invasion.

This was aggression against another Muslim country. Ironically, the Kuwaitis appreciated the intervention of the coalition. But I am sure many there and elsewhere know that the intervention was not due to the love for Kuwait or peace but rather to protect vested interests, a motivation which has often been the driving force behind many conflicts.

It was the British statesman Palmerston who said that, "There is no such thing as permanent friends, only permanent interests." Obviously, the enemies of Muslims would like to see Muslim countries fighting among themselves. After all, a united Muslim world would be a potent and influential grouping in global affairs.

The picture looks bleak when one examines the internal conflicts prevailing within the Muslim world. Take the case of Afghanistan. During the Soviet occupation, the Afghans

fought against the foreign invaders, although in the 1980s there were already horrific stories of intense rivalries among the various factions and tribes. When the Soviets withdrew, the true extent of these rivalries became all too apparent. Today, the country is still beset with conflict, this time among Muslims, denying development to the people of Afghanistan.

Is the Muslim world destined to remain disunited, to be preyed upon by others and to be exploited? One could make a number of observations.

The first is the lack of priority or focus. Of primary consideration should be the well-being of the population, rather than dwelling on ideologies or rivalries with neighbours and tribes. The lack of unity of mind (for instance, in the creation of a nation) often causes the early breakdown of states, depriving them of any chance of survival. Naturally, when power is being challenged, there is little hope of development. In Malaysia, we are fortunate that the Muslims here are not divided by tribes, as is the case for others.

At times, tribal values and feelings are stronger than the Muslim heritage. That is perhaps why we in Malaysia sometimes fail to understand why other Muslim communities fight among themselves. It is really a matter of tribal origins, and not of religion. If Muslims focus on bringing about economic development for themselves everything else would become of secondary importance. Then, perhaps there will be less fighting.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Very few Muslim-led governments have been economically successful. One of the reasons why Malaysia has been hailed as one of them is because of the lack of competition in the Muslim world. It is interesting to note that many Muslims living as minority groups have done well for themselves. There is no reason

why Muslims cannot be economically vibrant and competitive.

Second, Muslim leadership has been hard to come by, especially leaders who have the right kind of attributes. Pragmatism should be the guidance, for one cannot be too dogmatic in one's ways if economic prosperity for all is the goal. Why should it not be one of the main goals? Why should Muslims be less prosperous than other groups in any part of the world? Sometimes, Muslim governments and groups justify poverty by focusing and emphasising on spiritual aspects, neglecting to bring economic development for their peoples. Muslims certainly deserve prosperity and their leaders should not deprive them of it.

The time has come for Muslim governments, leaders and groups to be more focused in terms of bringing development to their *ummah*. Rivalries will only prevent this and as long as they fester, unity will remain an elusive dream and exist only in the minds of idealists. Muslims must begin to demand their rightful place in the economic development landscape and not simply be content with the premise that prosperity is only promised in heaven. This will only perpetuate poverty in the Muslim world. Muslims must never accept this, for all of us deserve to live in a better environment.

Attack on the US smear the good name of Islam

The Sun | September 16, 2001

WHEN the despicable attacks in the US occurred, I was quite disturbed. Whatever the reasons for the attack, taking the lives of others in an indiscriminate manner can never be justified and should always be condemned. It is always a sad day for humanity when such crimes are committed. There is just too much violence in this world, with no signs of abating.

The attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and their repercussions will be part of the world's psyche for a long time. While the final death toll will not be known for a while, it is expected to run into the thousands. If I am not mistaken, this is the worst terrorist attack that has ever happened. It is a sad day for Islam. I have always believed that to kill another human being in the name of religion is contradictory.

Muslims all over the world, particularly those who form minorities in the West, will be further subjected to widespread hatred. While we may blame the US and others for this prejudice, can you really blame them when horrendous acts have often been committed in the name of Islam?

One must differentiate the religion from its adherents—there is a wide gap between the two. What the Taliban, for example, has done has been strongly condemned by Muslims the world over.

The fear now is that the divide between Islam and the Western world will widen further. The attacks on New

York and Washington, D.C. could well make this drift a permanent feature. Much will depend on how the US will retaliate and the response from the Muslim world.

The US is contemplating some suitable ways of response although this is easier said than done. The enemy is elusive and not easily identified. Great powers have often suffered this similar fate of confronting enemies who are small yet potent. During the Vietnam conflict, the US military was defeated, not by a conventional army, but by soldiers in pyjamas. On the other hand, during the Gulf War we saw the US and its coalition running circles around the conventional Iraqi forces.

This time it is different and tougher. The US government is under pressure from the public to respond with force. They could attack Afghanistan if they discover that the Taliban has been sponsoring the perpetrators, but this will probably be limited to either precision or saturation bombings. The situation could then escalate, provoking more terrorist attacks in the continental US.

Let us hope that Washington acts prudently. To a large extent, it is easier to just invade and dislodge a conventional force. However, the enemy this time is not only hidden but is in a position to threaten the very heartland of America. This will be President Bush's dilemma.

I also fear the way that Muslims are going to be treated in the US and around the world. Many may recall how Americans of Japanese descent were treated after the attack on Pearl Harbour. Many were interned as they were deemed to be the enemy — even though they were loyal Americans, especially those of the second generation. Already we are reading reports of death threats against Muslim communities in the US.

What about Muslims travelling around the world, especially in the West. Will they be given the "third degree"

or even be detained? This could well happen, but then again, could we blame the West if they do take such measures? The attacks have been a grave injustice to the good name of Islam.

I have already written about militant Islam in this country and how we should combat it. The attacks on the US should strengthen the government's resolve to ensure that we will never see militancy rearing its ugly head in Malaysia. Therefore, we should support the government's efforts in combating these fanatics.

Credit must be given to the police for their swift response against the violent extremists in our midst. Some may criticise the use of the Internal Security Act (ISA) but these armchair critics should remember that most Malaysians support the government's actions. Many of us would just like to get on with our lives. The militant groups involved must never ever be allowed to gain a foothold.

The government has already revealed that such groups have received training and support from foreign elements. It is probable that these same foreign elements are responsible for numerous terrorist acts, possibly even the ones in the US.

Therefore, we must support the US call for a global coalition to fight terrorism—we are all potential targets. Foreign elements are probably already assisting such militant groups in this country. Like the US, we cannot combat terrorism alone; a global response is essential.

US actions forsake the plight of Muslims worldwide

The Sun | September 30, 2001

SOMETIMES I wish we were still living during the cold war era. At least, the US would be more restrained in what it does. What we are seeing today from the US is an arrogant display of its power, its limitless power and there seems to be no harness on it at all.

Where is the UN when we need it most? The UN should exercise some control over the use of force. Unfortunately, the calls by its secretary-general are but those of a toothless tiger—in fact, not even a tiger!

Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad hits the nail on the head when he said that one cannot fight terrorism without addressing its root causes. One reason why there is some degree of sympathy from Muslims all over the world is due to the feeling of oppression on the part of the Muslim *ummah*. Just consider the Israeli situation. Why is the world not shedding any tears when Palestinians perish daily?

While we condemn terrorism generally, why do we not condemn state terrorism—which is what Israel practises? When tanks are used against children armed with catapults, it is tantamount to state terrorism. The US should re-examine its support for Israel.

While I expressed initial sympathy for the US, I now harbour second thoughts. The Americans are taking advantage of the situation to mount an attack on Muslims in general. US President George W. Bush's choice of words (such as "crusade", etc.) could very well be calculated to rouse American nationalism. His statements, such as, "Either you are with us or against us" manifest sheer

arrogance. He is using might to justify his actions, and he is also twisting the arms of many to obtain their support.

Emotions are running high in the US as Bush garners support for military action which could well turn out to be a long drawn-out affair. If America does decide to deploy ground troops, then it would be the latest in a long list of foreign armies that have tried to subjugate the Afghans. If Washington acts foolishly enough, the US could well be on the brink of another Vietnam.

Dr Mahathir's cautionary note concerning America's retaliation is now becoming the mainstream view. One cannot but feel proud that despite possible criticisms from the West, Dr Mahathir is brave enough to speak on behalf of the many silent Muslims all over the world. We are now beginning to hear more voices supporting Dr Mahathir. It goes to show that the Malaysian leader has strong convictions and is becoming more of a champion of the plight of Muslims than many others so-called leaders who claim to be so. In this regard, Dr Mahathir is humble enough not to declare that he is defending the *ummah*, which he clearly is. His words are becoming influential, and more are speaking up for the Muslim world.

There are several countries that have pledged support for the US. For example, Japan has stated that it will provide logistical support. Clearly, these countries are but mere proxies and puppets of the US. Obviously, they will have no say in the planning of military operations. I cannot imagine the Japanese being consulted by the US on such matters. The Japanese will be but mere puppets of the US military machine. Should military action turn sour, countries like Japan would be in a precarious position. It reminds me of the many military campaigns over the centuries whereby big powers use colonial forces to fight their battles.

Obviously, little has changed except the players. While I can understand that Tokyo would like to demonstrate to Washington that it is supportive and willing to stand by its ally, Japan may jeopardise its own safety. I fear that an attack on the Taliban could well provoke further terrorist actions on a global scale, actions which will take in the countries that support the US action.

Where do we go from here? Do we wait for the US to unleash its forces or do we continue to garner support for some form of restraint on the Americans?

It is obvious that the Americans are seeking revenge and like most revenge-seekers, rational thinking gets thrown to the wind and is superseded by emotion.

While many would feel for the Americans' loss, their subsequent actions have tended to be irresponsible. The attacks on mosques in some parts of the world, such as in Australia, could be a response to the harsh language used by the Americans, including by its president. It amounts to giving a stamp of approval and legitimacy for people to vent their anger against Muslims on an international scale. This is highly irresponsible and most regrettable.

I would like to see sanity prevail. The situation should not be exploited as an opportunity to subjugate the Muslim world. After all, we have done much over the last decades to narrow the gap between Islam and the West. As a global power and player, the US should behave in a much more responsible manner.

Don't allow the vocal few to upset the status quo

The Sun | October 7, 2001

"WAR IS HELL" is a famous phrase describing human conflict. As the world teeters on the brink of conflict, it is a pity that while much has been said about peace and the need to strive for it, there are still people out there who are willing to use force to fight force. In other words, despite the enormous changes that have taken place in the world, things are still roughly the same. As the French phrase, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, goes, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for Asean not to jump on the US bandwagon and commit ourselves to their war effort, but instead play a mediating role, is most prudent. The region must not be seen as an appendage of the US. It has done much over the last few decades to become a relatively independent region, given its jagged past when the region was a battlefield for the great powers.

Hopefully, countries in the West, especially the US, realise that Malaysia under Dr Mahathir is a balanced and moderate example of a Muslim country and government. If one were to look around in the Muslim world, it is hard to find any nation that comes close to Malaysia. Under Dr Mahathir's leadership, Malaysia has achieved equitable growth and moderation in its interpretation of Islam. We have successfully walked the tightrope between moderation — which Islam represents — and extremism, which it abhors.

I have often made my views known on the threats from extreme forces. I do hope there will be more people out

there who will express loudly and clearly their support of Dr Mahathir in his fight against terrorism and not simply hide behind his strength.

I know of some who are fearful of supporting the prime minister for fear of being criticised by some quarters. I have no qualms about showing my support for Dr Mahathir as I firmly believe he is the only credible leader who can combat extremism in Malaysia.

I am disappointed when people talk about *jihad* and of *perjuangan Islam* (Islamic struggle). Why does *jihad* have to be confined to only fighting against other religions? Why can't we declare *jihad* against poverty and fight for a better life for Muslims the world over?

Today, many Muslims live in poverty under Muslim governments. Ironically, many Muslims lead comfortable lives in non-Muslim countries. Malaysia is an exception where Muslims and others lead a good life of hope and upward mobility. How many other Muslim countries can boast of such a record? To my knowledge, not many.

This brings me to the debate about Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia) wanting to declare Malaysia an Islamic country. The party's notion of such a declaration is precisely what is wrong with mere declarations. There are several countries that have proudly referred to themselves as Islamic republics and yet, extreme poverty and instability prevail in their midst.

What is the point of calling a country Islamic when it does not reflect the goodness of the religion and of the people? Surely Islam is not merely about keeping rules; rather it is about decency and bringing goodness into our lives.

As far as I am concerned, Malaysia, under the Barisan Nasional (BN, National Coalition), is a good example of a successful Muslim country. Most Malaysians are happy

with our daily lives and we should never jeopardise this for the conservatism of a few. In many countries, where people have little in their lives, the tendency to create havoc arises in such situations.

While one may be accused of being a prophet of doom, one should never neglect peace nor take it for granted. It would appear that there are quarters out there that would like to destroy what we have built and bring chaos to the country.

We must be vigilant and support the authorities in dealing with these elements. In the midst of a chaotic world, Malaysia is a peaceful place and I am sure most of us would like to preserve the status quo. Let us then, the silent majority, stand up together and be counted before the vocal minority in our midst jeopardise our lives.

Muslims must unite behind diplomacy and non-violence

The Sun | October 14, 2001

WAR IS HELL; nobody benefits from it. Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's reaction to the US bombing of Afghanistan was that it would not solve the problem. We all condemn terrorism but targeting Afghanistan will certainly not bring the matter to an end. What the Americans are doing is merely to demonstrate that it is willing to resort to the use of force against terrorism.

Defence experts point out that terrorism, by its very nature, cannot be overcome by force. To some extent, it is like guerrilla warfare — which can only be defeated by addressing its root cause. In our long campaign against the communists in our country, it is only by winning the hearts and minds of the population that the coffin for the insurgency was finally nailed.

This is what Dr Mahathir was talking about in the fight against terrorism. We need to address the deeper issues as to why people are willing to sacrifice their lives for a cause, one that has clearly struck a sympathetic chord among Muslims.

Statements by a number of British politicians reinforce my fear that we could well be on the brink of a wider conflict involving Muslims and the Western world. Words such as 'evil' have been used to refer to them and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's remarks further exacerbate the issue.

My fear is that all of this will provide racists with the justification they need for their bigotry. There is already so much racism out there and this will certainly not help things.

However, I find that there are ordinary people who, while angry with the attacks of September 11, know that one should separate those perpetrated the attacks from the community they came from. I noticed a small poster outside an English flower shop that reads: "Islam is not our enemy, but bigots are."

In 1997, a controversial book by Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, argued about the "clash of civilisations" by depicting the collision of Islam and the West. While Huntington was criticised for his views, his book may have been inopportune. When it was first published, there were many initiatives to narrow the gap between Islam and the West.

I am also afraid that people like Osama bin Laden will win the sympathy and support of Muslims everywhere, not because they believe in him, but because he has come to symbolise Islam's struggle in a world dominated by others. Osama uses the Palestinian card and projects himself as a leader who champions the plight of a much-maligned Muslim people. Muslim leaders should take up the issue and remain united. The US is not only supportive, but also a protector of Israel. If the Muslim world unites against Israel, diplomatically and minus the threat of force, it may be able to compel Tel Aviv to make concession. Currently, the Tel Aviv regime has become so arrogant that Palestinians are killed with impunity.

The time has come for joint initiatives by Muslim countries over the Palestinian issue. In doing so, we would render terrorist groups irrelevant through the launching of more positive measures.

It is sad that Muslim governments are willing to be exploited by others, so that there will always be conflict and division among them. God has bestowed much wealth upon the Muslim world, namely oil, which is potentially a

powerful resource. Why can't the Muslims unite and use it as a bargaining tool in the Palestinian issue?

Perhaps Malaysia should take the lead for I believe that Dr Mahathir possesses the right credentials to take on such an initiative. He is not only seen as a moderate, but also as a leader who has successfully transformed Malaysia into an advanced developing nation. I am sure he will be greatly supported not only by Malaysians, but also Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The Muslim world lacks a credible leader and Dr Mahathir can fill this vacuum well. Even from the Western perspective, Dr Mahathir is respected, despite his sometimes strident views on international issues. He is seen as someone who delivers, and is open and positive about foreign direct investments.

The time has come for the Muslim world to unite, not to condemn the Americans, but to champion the plight of Muslim communities that are oppressed by regimes out to destroy them. We must use diplomacy and economic pressure to bring about positive outcomes. Unfortunately, the media often misquotes Dr Mahathir. (This seems to be a bad habit with them.) As I see it, he is a person who condemns the use of force against anyone. While we are all unhappy with the situation in Palestine, I believe force is not the answer. Force will only breed more force as we are seeing now with the Americans. Anyone who has lived through past conflicts know that wars know of no victors — only victims.

Continued bombing of Afghanistan is indefensible

The Sun | November 4, 2001

WHEN I READ about the American bombing of Afghanistan, I ask myself: has someone gone bonkers in Washington or what? Whatever moral argument the US had following the September 11 attack, it evaporated when the US resorted to the use of blatant military power against a country which is already backward. This approach is plainly arrogant and a sheer demonstration of military might.

You just do not use heavy bombing, including precision bombing, against terrorism. True enough, after weeks of bombing, the US is slowly admitting that it may not meet its objective, which is to capture Osama bin Laden.

There are no more legitimate targets left for the Americans to bomb. The infrastructure of the Taliban is poor. They do not have large military formations, nor tanks and armoured vehicles in large numbers, nor airplanes. Their telecommunication lines are basic, and the list goes on and on. After the first week of attack, there must be very little that is left standing.

Obviously, the Taliban are hiding in civilian areas. If the US regards hospitals and mosques as legitimate targets, then those who gave the decisions to bomb them should be tried as war criminals.

I believe history will record the US bombing campaign in Afghanistan as an exercise in futility, unless there is a much more sinister latent objective. Even if Osama is captured, it will not end terrorism. Indeed, how will the Americans react if there continue to be other terrorist

attacks, by different groups? Will they then attack every Muslim?

That is why the current US approach to the problem is beyond rational military thinking. It is not difficult to bomb Afghanistan into the Stone Age.

When you read about its poverty and backwardness and contrast it with the sophistication of US bombing, one cannot help but conclude that this is bullying of the highest order.

Those who make the decisions to bomb are following the dictum that the end justifies the means, that the innocent will have to die in order for Americans to have their revenge. The question is: at what point will the quest for vengeance be satisfied.

What is saddening is the fact that the world is doing little to stop this senseless killing. In particular, the UN has done little to pressure the US. I strongly oppose the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Kofi Annan and the UN, given at a time when bombs were being dropped. I think the prestige of the Nobel Peace Prize has been diminished with this award.

This shows yet again that the UN is but a mere instrument of the powerful. The US favours a subservient UN and secretary-general. I remember the tenure of the previous secretary-general was not renewed as he had some problems with the US. I am even more convinced today that the UN has failed miserably and will continue to do so.

There is a dangerous attempt by some quarters to broaden the conflict, and to search for new enemies that the US government can target. Just because terrorists operate from a country does not mean that the government of that country supports terrorism. If one is to follow the logic, then the US supports terrorism, as several terrorist groups exist in America.

I think Americans themselves will protest against the bombing, and this opposition appears to be mounting. Whatever it is, the war must stop and I think after this is over, the US will be seen as an amoral country, for they have already lost the moral high ground.

United regionalism can thwart big-power interference

The Sun | November 11, 2001

WHILE THE WORLD is being gripped by terrorism, I wonder if people know that this term has been the subject of countless debates. It is an emotive concept, open to many interpretations, and may be summed up in a cliché, that "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

The Irish Republican Army (IRA) is seen by many Irish as freedom fighters, trying to get the British out of their land, while others regard it as a terrorist movement. There are also many who would argue that Israel practices state terrorism, and the list goes on.

Terrorism is only a means to an end — just like any other form of warfare, including guerrilla warfare. The ends are usually political, which differentiates them from criminal activities.

Terrorism has also been described as the weapon of the coward. In fact, it is the weapon of the weak. Only weak forces resort to terrorism as a means of getting their messages across.

In the case of Osama bin Laden, it is debatable whether he is really fighting for the Palestinians, although he appears to champion their cause. Obviously, he knows that this issue strikes a chord among Muslims all over the world and he has exploited it to the hilt.

Thanks to the Americans, he is now regarded as a champion of the Muslims, rightly or wrongly. The American bombings and the way the US has geared up against him by attempting to overthrow the Taliban has made Osama a living martyr.

I am not against the Americans going after him; what I oppose is the way they have gone about it. It would have been far more effective if the US had quietly despatched Special Forces to capture him, rather than demonstrating its raw power, which now appears to be getting out of hand.

The Americans have foolishly played into Osama's hands and now finds it difficult to end their futile campaign in Afghanistan. If they continue their bombing during the Ramadan and broaden it to include Iraq, this will further alienate the US in the eyes of Muslims everywhere.

Every time Osama talks about Islam, Muslims are misrepresented, but the ordinary non-Muslim feels that every Muslim believes in him. The way I see it, the Americans, in their zealotry to get Osama, have in the process strengthened his position. They should be brave enough now to admit that they have employed the wrong strategy.

One can understand why this approach was chosen as the American public wanted vengeance. The initial objective of capturing Osama quickly changed to one of going against those who protect him and his group. The US resorted to this strategy because it is far easier to bomb a country than to go against a band of terrorists.

In international affairs, great powers will use whatever justification possible to suit their objectives. A classic example is the US invasion of Grenada — under the pretext of freeing American medical students held hostage there — to oust the pro-Cuba government of Maurice Bishop and install Washington's puppet.

Nice-sounding words such as freedom and democracy are but mere rhetoric. That is the reason regions must become more united and empower themselves to ensure that the great powers can be neutralised and their interference kept to a minimum.

Malaysians should be proud that Dr Mahathir Mohamad's concept of a regional grouping, namely the East Asia Economic Grouping (EAEG), has finally been endorsed by the region. It demonstrates Dr Mahathir's farsightedness. Mahathir is also a committed Asianist for he believes and has faith in the region. His perseverance has served Malaysia and this region well.

While others may have different opinions about him, I believe that Dr Mahathir must continue to serve the nation. He is greatly needed now and in the future, especially with such uncertainties in the world today.

I sometime wonder whether the Asian financial crisis of 1997 could have been avoided or better managed if such a grouping had existed then. We in Malaysia are lucky that we have a strong and innovative leadership which dared to not follow the herd.

Democracy as the US fancies it

The Sun | December 9, 2001

IT HAS BEEN SAID that the world can only concentrate on one major global event at any one time. Since September 11, 2001, we all know what has dominated the news. Today, however, our attention is divided between America's war in Afghanistan and the worsening situation in Palestine. Sad to say, the scenario appears hopeless. It is a battle between the strong and the weak, and I am suspicious about the timing of the Israeli aggression.

It is obvious that the Israeli regime is using the excuse of the Hamas (Palestinian Islamic Movement) attacks as a way of demolishing Yasser Arafat's credibility. At a time when the Americans are fighting against their own definition of terrorism, Tel Aviv is jumping on the bandwagon to justify its move. Many would classify the Israeli action as an example of state terrorism.

With strong American backing, Israel can act with impunity. The UN is paralysed as any move towards condemning Tel Aviv would be vetoed by Washington. Such is the pathetic state of the UN today. The world will merely see the destruction taking place without being able to do anything.

The Middle East has changed since the 1970s. In those days, the Arab states were protecting the Palestinians. In fact, three major wars were fought—in 1948, 1967 and 1973—around the issue. Today, all the major powers in the region have been neutralised and are in no position to assist the Palestinians. Egypt today is a far cry from what it was in Nasser's days, and Syria is muted and unwilling to

jeopardise its own domestic stability. It appears that the Palestinians are alone. If they do decide to fight, it will be a battle between David and Goliath.

Turning to the Afghan issue, debate is raging in the US as to the possibility of putting Osama bin Laden on trial, if he is captured, that is. I remain certain that the order issued was to bring him dead, rather than alive. Nevertheless, one can imagine such a trial.

To begin with, the world has yet to be shown the evidence that connects the September 11 attacks to Osama. The setting up of a military court has raised eyebrows among some quarters as to the elastic definition of democracy by the self-proclaimed defenders of liberty themselves.

Washington's credibility is fast eroding and I am not sure it can defend its previous position. Countries such as the UK have long had to face terrorist attacks and they have laws that give special powers to the authorities to facilitate their investigations. Even our own Internal Security Act (ISA) is a British legacy.

I understand that the new law being discussed in the US will place the country in the same position as the UK where such powers already exist. I suggest that this new American law be called the Internal Security Act!

This brings to mind the infamous Nuremberg and Tokyo trials at the end of World War II. Academics still debate as to whether the trials were part of the victors' justice. It would be most interesting if Osama is caught and tried in America. It will be the trial of the millennium.

The Americans are using high-tech electronics to zoom in on Osama's whereabouts and even resorting to good old cash to pay for information. However, I am sure this will not take place as even Osama himself would prefer to die in battle.

On the successful conclusion of the Bonn talks over the new government of Afghanistan, I wonder whether it is possible to implement what was agreed upon (especially the elections) a few years from now. The biggest challenge and priority is to bring about stability in the war-torn country. It is only when stability is achieved that progress is possible.

But first there must be a period of reconciliation, and the country has to be brought under one roof with a shared notion of statehood. After all, only a few homogeneous states are still around. Most will have to balance the divisions and societal cleavages that characterise their national society.

In conclusion, I quote a French magazine's description of Malaysia — that it is the only successful Muslim country today. This is an image that befits Malaysia. While one size may not fit all, there is one aspect that we can contribute to the world — that is, on governance. While no state is perfect, Malaysia has had some success and we must articulate our view of moderate Islam when the opportunity arises. In a world where there is little hope, Malaysia could well provide a glimmer.

Islamic peacekeepers can prevent repeat of Afghan civil war

The Sun | November 18, 2001

WITH THE TALIBAN ousted from Kabul, a chapter in the tumultuous history of Afghanistan appears to have closed even as another opens. While the world was still in discussion, Northern Alliance troops, instead of waiting for the so-called coalition to be formed, overran the Afghan capital on the heels of the Taliban, who some six years earlier had overthrown them.

While some people may be jubilant, there are already concerns that we may see a repeat of the *mujahideen* rule before the Taliban came to power. Unconfirmed reports of summary executions of captured Taliban fighters do not augur well for the future nor do we want warlords to rule parts of the country.

The international community must move at a brisker pace as military operations seem to take priority over political solutions. It has been suggested that some form of power sharing is needed although this process under existing conditions would need to be mediated by the UN. There appears to be no other option.

The negotiations among the warring factions will not be easy as the divisions are based on ethnicity, and, historically, this has often proved to be the most difficult to manage. However, long-lasting peace cannot be imposed from outside, but must be genuinely generated from within Afghanistan. While one can blame outside interference, at the end of the day, it is the Afghans themselves who would have to be responsible for their own peace.

The idea of an interim peacekeeping operation (PKO) is a prudent one, as it will neutralise any potential violence and avert a breakdown in law and order. The PKO forces should come predominantly but not exclusively from Muslim countries.

In this connection, the Malaysian armed forces have extensive experience in PKO. We have sent full-fledged battalions to the Congo in the early 1960s and to Namibia, Cambodia and Bosnia in recent years, as well as observers and individuals to head the UN PKO.

The Royal Malaysian Police has vast experience in such matters and is skilled in the maintenance of law and order. At one point, we had the seventh largest PKO force and this shows the confidence that the UN has in us.

Malaysia could well play a leading role in this regard and it will demonstrate the country's commitment towards peace in different parts of the world.

But what is to become of the Taliban?

It appears that the Taliban will continue to fight, resorting to guerrilla warfare. In other words, the new coalition government in Kabul will have to wage a counter-insurgency war against them.

The situation in Afghanistan does beg a number of questions which may be relevant to Malaysian society. The first is, who gave the right to the religious groups to claim themselves the ultimate interpreters of the Holy Quran? And *jihad*?

I cannot imagine Allah the Merciful allowing Muslims to kill another human being, whether Muslim or not. Is it right to kill another person for whatever cause? Look at the Iran-Iraq conflict, for example, where thousands perished with each side claiming *jihad* and labelling the other as infidels.

This brings me to Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia), which has made many claims. I abhor Muslims who readily accuse another Muslim of being a *kafir* (infidels), which PAS has the tendency to do. I can only regard these people as being religiously arrogant. Malaysians must see that, at the end of the day, they are just using religion as a vehicle to gain power. God forbid. I look forward to the day we, especially the Malay community, go back to our traditions and resist the influence of what is essentially Arabic culture.

Islam is for everyone and it stands for peace and harmony. It accommodates, not imposes. At the end of the day, it is the individual who will be answerable to the Almighty. If you look at Malay society, on the surface it would appear that the community has become more pious. However, that has not produced a corresponding reduction in crimes among the community. On the contrary, we have seen horrendous offences being committed. How do you explain this ironic state of affairs?

The Islamisation process has not produced the kind of society we would like to create. People must learn to be truthful enough to admit this and look again at themselves. Are we inculcating the right kind of moral values, or are these being taught through the rote method. In other words, when we teach religion in Malaysia, do we discuss or do our teachers merely preach about punishment? As I have always argued, life is full of grey areas, and is not all black or white. Our religious teachers and scholars must be human beings, not moral judges of a society that is far from perfect.

Dr Mahathir's views a welcome voice for Islam

The Sun | January 27, 2002

NEXT week, the movers and shakers of the world will meet at New York for the annual conference of the prestigious World Economic Forum (WEF). Every year they usually meet at the ski resort of Davos in Switzerland, but this year it is convened at the Big Apple. The annual themes of the WEF meeting reflects the year's concern and this year the focus is on the uncertainty surrounding the world, especially in view of the attacks on the US, as well as other places. It will be the best forum in town to convey any message, however blunt it may be.

This year in particular, they have invited and confirmed a very impressive list of the world's top leaders, both heads of state or of governments or from the industry. Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been invited and will address this Forum. It is no coincidence that he is invited for I believe this is a recognition of not only his international standing and stature, but also his ideas and leadership, two qualities in short supply in the world today.

Dr Mahathir will bring with him not only an image of a leader of a successful Muslim country but that of someone who is well respected in the Muslim and non-Muslim world. He is also known for not mincing his words and I am sure the WEF would like to listen to him in order to get some direction as well as to listen to a moderating viewpoint. In other words, Dr Mahathir's presence is a confirmation and reaffirmation of his leadership in the global arena. One cannot help but be proud of being Malaysian.

In a very humble way, I am associated with the WEF, having attended the WEF meeting in Davos and elsewhere some years ago, including as a panelist. Once, much to my surprise, I was appointed to the WEF's Global Leaders for Tomorrow, which puts me, at least on paper, together with a bunch of other people of my age group (I have moved on by now, of course), and we keep in touch through a structure that is organised by the WEF.

There are several Malaysians who belong to this group. From the literature I received lately, informing me of the conference in New York, I know that it is going to be a gathering of immense importance in order to chart future directions. One good thing about this Forum is that it is more global than European or American. The latter have even admitted that this is probably the most significant global event in the world.

Because it is less American oriented, it is clear to me that they would ask for Dr Mahathir to articulate a view that could well be much more palatable to the world than one that is too closely associated to the US. It is often forgotten that Europeans tend to have different views from the Americans, although we regard them as part of the West, which they are. When I speak to Europeans, they often disassociate themselves from the Americans. We know, for instance, that the French are fiercely independent and often have quite divergent viewpoints from the Americans.

As I scroll the list of world leaders, it is clear that Dr Mahathir is the only leader of that stature that could speak on behalf of the developing and Muslim world.

It is unfortunate that looking around the Islamic world, we stand quite alone, not only in terms of political development, but also because of economics. Although some states are wealthy, they are not politically developed, most of them being absolute monarchies, with little

semblance of democracy and sometimes, the distribution of income in these countries leaves much to be desired.

Malaysia actually has a good story to tell, and I hope more Malaysians would help the prime minister in projecting this positive image of our country.

This week we have been informed of local groups and individuals being associated with the al-Qaeda movement and these are quite frightening as their ideology is alien to us here. They are also violent and this is not our culture. Kudos to the police in taking swift action to contain the movements Malaysians, especially Muslims, must realise that just because they declare themselves to be good Muslims and to strive for this, that and the other, we should not be too impressed. To begin with, they are out to destroy the fabric of life that we cherish. Moreover, they are exploiting us for their own benefit.

Many people claim to be more knowledgeable in Islam and yet have a myopic view of it. Malays need to be much more circumspect when we meet such people and we must resist them at all cost. We are a moderate Muslim country and it is good to be one. What we have done for the Muslim world has far outweighed what the radicals have done for the good name of Islam. I often come across Europeans and Americans who are surprised by what they see in Malaysia, for their perception of Islam is very negative, associating it with poverty and violence. We must continue to project the positive aspects of the religion.

Despite history's catalogue of misery, let's hope for better things

New Straits Times | November 1, 1999

WHEN THE CLOCK strikes twelve midnight on December 31, 1999, we will enjoy a triple celebration — a new year, a new century and a new millennium, notwithstanding the dispute as to when the new millennium actually begins. No wonder there is so much enthusiasm and anticipation around. While there will be optimists around, there are equal numbers of pessimists, some of whom have predicted the worst-case scenario, especially resulting from the Y2K bug.

So all in all, mankind will be in for a good or bad time. How much change should we really expect? A Latin phrase says, "Times change and we change with the times," while a second in French states, "The more things change, the more they remain the same."

World history does not give us much room for optimism. Wars, famine, destruction and misery are still very much part of us. While we cannot avoid natural disasters, it would appear that man's folly has resulted in more destruction than nature has intended. This century alone has seen death resulting from conflicts and the display of raw political power. Individuals like Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, Stalin and Slobodan Milosevic have caused so many deaths. The sad thing about all this was that the society in which these people had lived and the rest of the world allowed for such individuals to exercise the dark side of their power. One suspects the world will continue to see such men in the coming millennium despite man's technological advancement.

Over the centuries, there existed a gap between technology and the human mind. It appears that technology has brought untold progress to mankind, making our lives that much more convenient. Our standard of living has improved by leaps and bounds. However, the very human mind that has led to such technological discoveries, is still very much driven by instincts that have existed since the cavemen, millenniums before. The nature of violence has never changed. The ways we express our hate and violent behaviour have however changed. Technology has given us the variety and the options.

Are we doomed? Is the human mind as basic as before and are we fated irrespective of human inventions?

The world today is full of paradoxes—in fact the world is one big contradiction. While man explores space, others are scouring for food in the wastelands everywhere. While man search for the cure for the ills of the world, others are working hard in defence laboratories, looking for more efficient killing machines. While man speaks of peace, bombs are being dropped on helpless population. While some surf the Internet for knowledge, others can't even read. The list of contradictions is endless.

Clearly, much depends on the individual, the community and the government. Every segment of society has a role to play in ensuring that there will be a difference in the future.

While one could be a realist and come to the conclusion that things will not change, it is idealism that has become the beacon for hope for mankind over the centuries.

To be a realist is to be fatalistic and this can well lead to complacency, while being an idealist could bring about progress.

Over the last few years, we have seen a burgeoning of terms that have come to symbolise globalisation. One of this

is "borderless". While environmental, health and financial issues transcend boundaries, states have tended to reassert their sovereignty. This is not necessarily such a negative development. The thing is that globalisation is feared by most, if not all, simply because of its nebulous nature and its lack of origins. Europeans fear it as much as Americans and Asians. However, there is a feeling that globalisation will reinforce itself in the new millennium.

While we could feel a little helpless in our ability to control events, we could certainly help influence its outcome. Although human history has been a catalogue of misery, it has also seen progress that has given new meanings to all of us. Like all historic junctures of human history, such as the moment that we are all about to witness very soon, that of a new era, let us all enter this period with our eyes widely opened and remain as optimistic as those before us have been.

Economic security is more valuable than democracy

The Sun | June 3, 2001

EVERY TIME I read about what is happening in Indonesia or the Philippines, I begin to doubt the benefits of democracy. While we all strive for it — and this has been the battle cry for so many who want political freedom — the real challenges appear when one has obtained it. Managing democracy seems to be the trick here and this is where many have faltered. Churchill once described democracy as the worst form of government, although he added that it is still far better than anything else. This brings me to my point as to whether democracy is an end in itself, or more of a means to an end.

In all struggles, especially during the wars of liberation, many have advocated political freedom. After all, several of them were educated in the land of their colonial masters and were exposed to the ideals of democracy. The fact that these countries were suppressing democracy in the colonies was conveniently regarded as a matter of academic debate.

Today, democracy is experiencing a comeback, with several successes exemplified in the fall of dictatorial regimes, especially in Asia. Two decades ago, there were many more such regimes than those democratically elected. Today, very few governments are not elected by their peoples even though the extent of democracy is debatable. While one can claim to be democratic, there needs to be some qualifications as there are various degrees of democracy, mainly determined by the political culture, transparency in the electoral process, freedom of the press and of speech, and other democratic paraphernalia.

It seems clear that despite the push from some Western countries, states, governments and their peoples should be a little more critical about democracy, especially when its inherent institutions are not present. It is often forgotten (and conveniently so) that the Western countries themselves took a long time and fought many wars before they reached their present status. It is very unfair for these countries to now demand for democracy to happen within a very short period in their former colonies. They prefer democracy to be introduced even though it may create instability.

I believe we should determine our own fate, rather than be dictated to. When chaos reigns supreme, the Western companies will be among the first to withdraw. These advocates will then make their own assessment — about how the situation is not ripe, that anti-democracy groups are preventing the birth of democracy, etc.

It all boils down to several issues, the paramount one being the economic well-being of the population. There is little point in having democracy when the population is starving and poverty is endemic. The irony is that the leaders of these fledgling democracies live in a different environment from that of the general population. For instance, while Indonesia decides who should rule and many months have passed in debating this, the average Indonesian is suffering, especially now that the rupiah has deteriorated further. I wonder whether the average Indonesian actually bothers who is running their country.

I am also taken aback by people taking to the streets and demanding the fall of elected leaders. We saw this most recently in the Philippines and Indonesia. Not surprisingly, many, including folks in the West, are excited about the so-called "people's power" in action. It is most newsworthy and projects exciting pictures. Many, especially those who

claim to be champions of democracy, are pleased with what is happening. I would like to ask a question: if a million people take to the streets and demand that an elected government steps down, is that democracy? Should we support this and should the government concerned succumb? Are we forgetting the other millions?

It is unfortunate that this had to happen in the case of the Philippines. It has a constitution and it has provisions for the removal of a leader. By taking to the streets, one is not giving enough time for the institutions to be nurtured. Patience is everything in a democracy. The danger is that once a precedent is set there is no guarantee that in future "people's power" will not emerge again. I understand that President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is calling for fresh elections to gauge whether her actions were supported by the people. While this is a noble move on her part, the fact that she has taken steps to remove the elected president is, at least as far as some are concerned, incorrect and has set a precedent.

Yes, one may be frustrated in the sense that the incumbent had used all the available instruments to block her earlier move towards impeachment. However, some would see this as a test of the constitution. I believe that stability and prosperity are the two most important elements of a country and any government that guarantees this should be supported. Democracy is quite irrelevant. However, when a state has evolved over the years, achieving higher forms of democracy may be made the objective.

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Ever since independence in 1957, Malaysia has achieved steady economic growth. While there have been several periods where the country had experienced economic dislocations of various sorts, such as the recession of the mid-1980s and the financial crisis of 1997, Malaysia has been able to come out of them wiser and ready to continue on its economic path. Politically, the country is one of the most stable democratic countries in East Asia. While there will always be debate as to the extent of democratic practice in the

country, its stability is of an overriding concern to the political leadership. Except for the racial riots of May 1969, Malaysia has achieved uninterrupted peace and stability.

However, as the country moves into the 21st century, with the society becoming more sophisticated and with the challenge of globalisation, Malaysia finds itself in a state of transition. It appears that what have been done before may no longer be acceptable nor relevant to a Malaysian public that has grown more aware and better informed. As such, Malaysia faces the future with the necessity to meet the challenges head-on.

Regionally and internationally, things are equally complex. While the world has changed tremendously, practice appears to remain the same. This book comprises the personal views of a Malaysian on many pertinent issues, both domestic and international, that impinge on Malaysia. As Malaysia becomes a more important player in the region and the world, its views must be understood and heard.

Abdul Razak Baginda is the executive director of the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre, a private think-tank in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He is a graduate of King's College, London, and is currently completing his doctorate at the University of Oxford.

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