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Of Malays and mindset



By Prof Tan Sri Dzulkifli Abdul Razak - July 29, 2018 @ 9:02am



People queuing up to cast their votes during the 14th General Election in May. Old habits may die hard but a new mindset is needed to deal with new realities. FILE PIC

THE Malay legendary hero, Laksamana Hang Tuah, is well known for his profound quote that the Malays will not “vanish” from the face of the Earth (Takkan Melayu hilang di dunia). Others said he had a caveat to it, that is, only as long as they hold strongly to Islam (selagi berpegang teguh kepada agama Islam). These words were pronounced during the heyday of the Melaka sultanate.

The sultanate then was well recognised and respected, evidenced by the many emissaries paying homage to the sultan, including the Chinese kingdom of the day. In 1414, Sultan Iskandar Shah (formerly Parameswara, the founder and first ruler before embracing Islam) reportedly established tributary relations with Ming China.

By the 1430s, the sultanate became a great entrepot with traders coming from India, the Middle East, Persia and Southeast Asia. It, therefore, aroused interest from the West, which later on led to its demise in 1511 at the hands of the Portuguese invaders. Melaka was said to be at its height during the period, which led to speculation as to why Hang Tuah said what he said. That the Malays somehow managed to survive with other sultanates flourishing in the different “states” until the formation of Persekutuan Tanah Melayu (literally, the Federation of Malayland) give credence to Hang Tuah’s words.

In this sense, Hang Tuah is right as the “Malayness” can still be felt and experienced until today despite the Malays being reduced to just a community among communities, thanks to the British colonial policies on mass migration.

As recent as 2012, Chedet in his blog (Sept 4) implied the opposite when he wrote about Malays in *Singapura* (which was part of the “Malayland”, historically). This, he argued, was based on the absence of Malay schools in the “new” republic (no more a sultanate). The Malay culture has been eroded impacting the Malayness, so to speak. In similar ways, Malaysia is experiencing the same, according to the blog, when the younger generation (*anak muda*) refused to be recognised as Malays. Perhaps, they are too scared to be labelled as “racist”.

If one were to take a broader Nusantara view, recognising that Malays are “natives” of the Malay Archipelago that stretches from East Timor to Malaysia and the Philippines, or even taking Sri Lanka and the Cape of Africa into account, then Hang Tuah’s assertion is even better positioned. The Malay diaspora, after all, flung far and wide.

That said, this issue took a different turn last week. It surfaced again when Sultan of Perak Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah shared his fear that the Malays would go extinct “like the dinosaurs”. The context and metaphor is rather “new” as no one has referred to the Malays in such terms previously. “Extinct” has a different connotation from “vanish”, while using “dinosaur” as a metaphor is quite another. The implications are rather strong. Why?

Sultan Nazrin was further quoted: “Dinosaurs have a large body but a small brain, and they are incapable of adapting to environmental changes, choosing to remain in their old habitats.

“Eventually, their population shrank and they became extinct, leaving behind just their fossils for exhibition in museums and as study materials,” he said.

Sultan Nazrin, therefore, urged the Malays to change their mindset to deal with the physical, social, economic and political changes in the country, pointing to the aftermath of the 14th General Election.

In an earlier royal address at the 5th World Conference on Islamic Thought and Civilisation, Sultan Nazrin described this change as an “unprecedented transformation”, which some argued would not be possible without the support of the Malays in many ways. This, as suggested, can be attributed to the opening of their eyes, and waking up to the “bitter truth” pre-May 9 (rather than after the event as implied). In other words, the Malays were yet again the “usher” of the “new environment” (not unlike the events leading to Merdeka).

In this context, Sultan Nazrin is right when he called for the acceptance of the new reality (directed to those who still insist on the “old” ways despite the writing on the wall). But that is hardly limited to the Malays. A case in point is the multi-streamed race-based schools and the related organisations nationwide.

The sultan was spot on when he advocated that “the Malays who wanted to progress and gain the respect of others should not allow themselves to be slaves to wealth to the point that they become willing to give up their principles and values”.

The problem is no longer confined to the Malays, but in fact, has become national in nature. In that respect, the desired mindset change must also be overwhelmingly “new” cutting across ethnicities, cultures and creeds. If one is to insist on the “dinosaur” metaphor, then the Malays perhaps are one of the many species who will go extinct pulling the others down as well. It is not so much because of the inability to adapt but more because old habits die hard.

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