

AWAKENING THE SENSES OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Last month, The National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) held its first lecture series for the year under the banner INTAN Lecture Series (Integrity). The lecture aimed at creating a platform for intellectual discourse for civil servants surrounding the themes of integrity and nation building. Professor Dato' Dr Ahmad Murad Merican from The Centre for Policy Research and International Studies (CenPRIS) of Universiti Sains Malaysia delivered the lecture that in many ways awakened the senses of us civil servants who heard him talk at the INTAN Auditorium.



The Professor's lecture was not one which subscribed to the common substance of integrity that the civil service is accustomed to. Rather, it was one that delved into the integrity of the nation's history. The lecture entitled "Engaging with History, Society and the Nation" revealed the idiosyncrasies of Malaysian history which has either been misrepresented, under represented or not represented at all. The main take-away of the lecture was the importance for civil servants to engage in, to quote Professor Ahmad Murad, "the different levels of discourse permeating in our midst," "the origins of the discourses" and "how they affect public sentiments." Such a discourse could not have come at a more opportune moment when the nation is being confronted with the different forces, ideologies and schools of thought that are challenging Malaysia's existence.

Being at the forefront of national development, it is crucial for civil servants to have a sound knowledge of the foundations of the country, which encompass the nation's history. Malaysia's Administrative and Diplomatic Officers, who constantly enrich themselves with knowledge of the nation's past and the diverse levels of popular discourse are bound to craft well-informed decisions for generations to come.

Without the knowledge of history, man is at a loss. For history links the past, the present and the future. Tun Dr Mahathir ever since his comeback as Malaysia's 7th Prime Minister, time and again reminds us on the significance of history. In his address to the Malaysian civil service on 14 January 2019 at the Prime Minister's Department monthly assembly in Putrajaya, Dr Mahathir was quoted as saying, "*Sejarah penting bagi kita menentukan kita bertindak dengan cara yang bijak.*" Translated it means, "History is important for us to ensure we act wisely." Quoting Harvard Professor in Philosophy, George Santayana, Tun

further reminds us that “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” We must take serious heed of this wise elderly statesman’s advice, who, more than a world leader, is an institution in the memories of the people.

The civil service must value the importance of history as a branch of knowledge that equips us to execute our daily routines *par excellence*. However, history is not without its diverse versions. We must be conscious of the different angles of history and its intent. The history that prevails in Malaysia and in many other parts of the world - the developed nation is no exception, are the versions of history promoted by those in power.

In the process of constructing the nation, specific versions of national history have been promoted publicly through school textbooks, tourism brochures, monuments, buildings, commemorations, museum exhibits, films and the media. The use of these vehicles to colour the people’s perception of local history is not a new design of the post-independence government. Rather it is inherited from the colonial administration.

In Malaysia, the 1971 National Cultural Policy has further fashioned the narration and representation of Malaysian history. The works of scholar and historian, Abu Talib Ahmad (2008, 2014) have consistently revealed how with such a policy in place, national history has been depicted to fit official perspectives, while aspects that are religiously and politically inappropriate are concealed and silenced.

Local films produced to re-enact the nation’s road to independence has not done justice to the different groups who had played significant roles to free Malaysia from the clutches of the colonial powers. In the case of local museums, Abu Talib Ahmad in his work, “Museum, History and Culture in Malaysia,”

published in 2014, discusses that the role of Malaysian museums in nation building has been at the expense of museums as “custodians of heritage within the context of a narrowly defined nationalist agenda.” Abu Talib further observes, “This nation-building function was inherited from museums during the preceding period, which according to Benedict Anderson, shaped the way in which, along with censuses and maps, the colonial state ‘imagined’ its dominion. Newly emerging nation states have adopted and adapted this role.”

Since independence in 1957, the national school textbooks in Malaysia had promoted the Kapitan China, Yap Ah Loy, as one of the founders of Kuala Lumpur. In 2018, the narrative of Kuala Lumpur city took a different turn when scholar Abdur-Razzak Lubis, released his 648-page book entitled “Sutan Puasa, Founder of Kuala Lumpur.” The book, which was launched on 7 April 2018 by singer Sheila Majid, a descendant of Sutan Puasa, revealed new information about the founder of Kuala Lumpur. The year prior, 2017, Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Khoo Kay Kim had raised questions in several intellectual discourses when he stated that “the founder of Kuala Lumpur was Sutan Puasa, from Mandailing.”

Lubis’s work provides substantial evidence through illustrations and documents, establishing his argument that the prevailing versions of Kuala Lumpur’s history had omitted. Terry McGee, Professor Emeritus of Asian Research and Geography from University of British Columbia, in his forward of the book, describes Lubis’s research as making “a major contribution to the reinvention of hegemonic Malaysian historical narratives.” McGee, further calls Lubis’s work as “vernacularizing history.” By that McGee explains, “this is history as seen from the perspectives of ethnically and culturally diverse groups of people who

are actively engaged in making history at the local level – the people who are often perceived, by other more privileged groups in society, as ‘getting in the way of history’.”

We must understand history as a construct that has room for revision. A revision that gives individuals and groups their rightful place in history. Lubis’s work, which became a Bestseller at *Kinokuniya* soon after its release, is only a fraction of the many oral traditions in the country yet to be researched and documented. There are many more untold stories in Malaysian history which deserve to be exposed so that we can learn lessons from.

In a course conducted at INTAN Bukit Kiara for civil servants nationwide, *Kursus Negara Bangsa*, the display of oral testimonies ranging from Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tan Sri Too Chee Chew and the course participants of diverse backgrounds testify to the legacy of the multi-layers of Malaysian society in the different chapters of Malaysian history that is rarely given voice. The reality is that there are many more communities in the country that have not been given due recognition in the annals of Malaysian history, only to be neglected in the wider picture.

Once upon a time the unique mix of communities in Malaya were assumed by cynics as impossible ingredients for the formation of a new nation. The widespread scepticism of the 1950s that newly independent Malaya would be a disaster had been a vast contrast to the optimism of the 1990s when Malaysia was observed as a vital economic power in Asia. Indeed, Malaysia has proven to the world that diversity is a strength rather than a weakness.

The most recent turn of events in Malaysian politics has once again placed Malaysia centre-stage in the eyes of the world. We must come to terms with the

reality that regardless of race, culture, creed or ideology, each played a pivotal role in moving the country forward. Coming from a God-conscious society, no Malaysian can dispute the *Qadr* (Decree) of The Almighty that has placed us within a nation that is diversely rich to make us come out of it enlightened, empowered, resilient, strong and united.

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