

The changing paths of progress

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

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THE prime minister addressed groups of student leaders and public service officers in succession over the week. The theme that ran through these meetings was change.

But it is not just any type of change. Rather, it was one that is transformational in nature and had a significant impact on the wellbeing of society.

A change that is relevant not just for today, but also for the needs of tomorrow with all its complexities. Linear and homogenous changes are no longer deemed as sufficient.

Therein lie a number of challenges. One is the issue of leadership which itself must be transformational in substance.

Leaders who merely echo the current thinking without so much as questioning the existing assumptions are mere followers preserving the status quo even when it clearly shows to be lagging.

Such leaders are more interested in self-preservation and are unable to spearhead the transformation starting with the self.

Another, as the prime minister noted, is the ability to uphold the principles of intellectual honesty and integrity.

This means a leader must be a thinking person, capable of separating the wheat from the chaff, his decisions based on evidence rather than emotionally-charged rumours and half-truths.

The thinking, too, must be transformational because, as often quoted, problems created at one level of thinking cannot be solved without moving on to the next level of thinking -- thinking out of the box.

Thus, we are back to the need to challenge the assumptions on which a particular tract of thinking is based, which normally limits the perimeter of thinking that so often traps one into being "politically correct" when it is intellectually dishonest.

Consequently, all too often, we tend to sacrifice much of our traditional values and indigenous knowledge as though they do not matter.

Jaguh kampung (village champion) is coined to convey an impression that these are indeed irrelevant and to be frowned upon. Yet, the world continues to exert itself metaphorically as a kampung (global village), with its own version of jaguh for us to emulate.

What it implies is that once you discard your roots and lose your identity, you can then be the real jaguh kampung sanctioned by someone else's value system and norms.

This type of jaguh kampung are everywhere, including in leadership positions. Like it or not, it is not transformation that we should be seeking.

Malaysia seemed to be aware of this when Wawasan 2020 was launched with its inherent notion of "dalam acuan kita sendiri".

At that time, and perhaps still now, Wawasan 2020 was regarded as unique for being able to articulate not only the wants of the new, but also the time-tested, religio-culturally speaking.

Sad to say, this is not the case now. As we develop externally and physically, we seem to deteriorate internally and spiritually.

And this is reflected today, for, as we seek to increase our economic indices, we also notch up our corruption indices.

As we build new structures, we destroy our heritage in the name of progress. They are now mere showpieces devoid of its soul.

All these are anything but Wawasan 2020 which is just a decade away.

For the next 10 years, what should we do?

The operational word again is "transformation" but with the clear mind that another world is possible.

And this is the reality as alluded to in the phrase dalam acuan sendiri.

In this way, it gives us courage to ask "Whose world?" in seeking meaning to the illusive term of "world-class".

To deride what we have as always inferior, and must therefore be supplanted by something else can be defeatist in itself.

Unknowingly, we have been enslaved mentally: we are to follow and not to lead, as the rules of slavery dictate.

Ironically, Malaya-Malaysia, since its days seeking Merdeka, has demonstrated its capacity and capability in transformational thinking and leadership to take it to where we are now.

We did transform suspicion into trust, segregation into unity, selfishness into sharing.

The word kongsi, for example, has become a Malaysian terminology.

But of late, we have become victims of our own success: suspicion, segregation and selfishness have crept in again.

We have lost our sense of history. The collective trust and sincerity that was arduously built, brick by brick is starting to crumble, substituted by a thickening cloud of malice.

Unless we dare to embark on transformational thinking again, Wawasan 2020 will remain an illusion.

A matter for the record

Prof Myint Zan had in his letter, published in the Letters to the Editor page (NST, July 22), disputed a fact in my column on July 19.

I had written that US President Kennedy had declared, barely six weeks after Yuri Gagarin became the first man to orbit earth, "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon..."

Myint said it was "exactly 23 days, not six weeks".

Gagarin had orbited earth on April 12, 1961 and it is on record that Kennedy made the declaration before a special joint session of Congress on May 25.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my

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