

Merdeka Award gives us the heroes we need

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

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MALAYSIANS must surely be proud that when the nation commemorated its 50 years of independence two years ago, the occasion also marked the establishment of the Merdeka Award to celebrate the true spirit of independence and the pursuit of excellence.

This is particularly significant because there is now a platform to recognise individuals for their "outstanding and lasting contributions to the nation and the people of Malaysia".

In other words, Malaysia can add to its list of national heroes, people who have made arduous attempts to ensure that the nation's independence is more meaningful and robust.

Relative to other nations, Malaysia does not have many heroes to count on. If there are, we hardly talk about them, especially those during the pre-colonial era, or even during the colonial period itself. This has created a kind of a vacuum in the understanding of our history.

Depending on who wrote the history, some were labelled as "enemies" or "terrorists", rather than heroes! Historians, too, can be at odds in justifying who is who.

Be that as it may, five decades after independence, the traits of the new heroes are clearer. Their contributions are much better documented and visible to more people.

And with the Merdeka Award, hopefully, the pinnacle of all similar awards will help us crystallise who they are.

For 2008, the inaugural winners included three individuals, namely. Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid (Education and Community category), Datuk Leslie Davidson(Outstanding Contribution to Malaysians), and Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Khalid Kadir (Health, Science and Technology).



The Nipah Virus Encephalitis Investigation Team was also the joint winner of the Merdeka Award in the Health, Science and Technology category. The Malaysian Nature Society won in the Environment category.

All five are the new role models that would be the icons for the younger generations of Malaysians.

Universiti Sains Malaysia is indeed fortunate to be given the honour to start the Merdeka Award Lecture Series, aimed at bringing the esteemed winners closer to the people. The university was most fortunate to host Dr Khalid's lecture last week.

Described as "an eminent academician, a prolific researcher, a respected clinician and a dedicated teacher of medicine", Dr Khalid has dedicated more than 30 years of his life to medical sciences, particularly in the areas of endocrinology.

He undertook various research on diabetes, including reasons why it has become widespread recently, and the correlations between the ailment and modern lifestyle. He is also active in epidemiological research on

diabetes and has conducted clinical trials.

Dr Khalid also spearheaded the Young Diabetes Study from 1966 to 1999 and, more recently, the Metabolic Syndrome in Malaysia study which is in its completion stages.

In short, Dr Khalid has contributed immensely in the understanding of endocrinological diseases, allowing many policy decisions to be taken for the good of Malaysians and the healthcare system.

Among others, USM has benefited directly from his expertise, whether directly from collaborative research or, more importantly, from the many talented students of his, who are now holding responsible positions at USM.

People such as Dr Khalid will be the "new" heroes, inspiring the new breed of Malaysians and the future of Malaysia by pushing the boundaries of knowledge.

As often quoted, the empire of the future is the empire of the mind. The Merdeka Award has initiated the crucial process in carving that space in the future through the likes of Dr Khalid.

In this regard, too, USM is very privileged to be given the honour to house the newly-created Right Livelihood College in its campus.

The college is the brainchild of the Right Livelihood Award Foundation, responsible for an annual award, popularly known as the "Alternative Nobel Prize".

Established in 1980 by philanthropist Jakob von Uexkull, it honours those "working on practical and exemplary solutions to the most urgent challenges facing the world today".

There are now more than 133 Laureates from 57 countries and a number of them are Malaysians. They are all heroes in their own right.

At the end of it all, such noble awards will invariably help to raise our level of commitment to seek a harmonious world through the pursuit of global knowledge.

But more than just knowledge, it is how they are translated to uplift the lives of others and humanity as a whole as the final reward in the journey of excellence. This, in a nutshell, is the

ultimate challenge for a better future for the human ecosystem in the most sustainable way.

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