

Hard lesson from a lost island

Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

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It may be accurate to describe the recent International Court of Justice decision on the disputed "rock islands" between Malaysia and its southern neighbour as a "win-win" situation.



On the surface that is what it appears to be, although some would argue that the "win-win" is not necessarily in equivalent terms. But that is for them to argue it out.

What is sad of course is that another part of peninsular Malaysia is now no longer with us.

The historical fact remains that Pulau Batu Putih used to be an integral part of the Johor sultanate as documented in the ICJ submission.

For those who appreciate history, the implication of the decision is no doubt a difficult one to accept, more so because under the new ownership, this historical fact will invariably be lost, intentionally or otherwise.

To begin with, Pulau Batu Putih, as it was known to the sultanate has not been recognised as such. Instead the island was given a Portuguese name, Pedra Branca.

This alone perhaps is a clear signal that the name Pulau Batu Putih, as of May 23, 2008, will be just words on old maps.

We are already too familiar with what happened to another part of the Johor sultanate (albeit a larger chunk) that left the Federation of Malaysia some decades ago.

Under the new ownership, there is little mention, if any, of the link to this once vibrant region long before the colonial powers usurped it.

Indeed, the history of that part of the federation is conveniently construed to start from the day it was "discovered" by the colonial power then. There is little interest to emphasise how it came about and what it was before that time.

In other words, that part of history will be silent forever. Or, put another way, it is relegated to the dustbin of history, just like *Persekutuan Tanah Melayu*.

It follows, therefore, that all the cultural significance of that particular time in history ceased to exist, except as curious exhibits.

And it could be worse, for at times these are not found even in the museums of the "new" nation. Such will be history of Pulau Batu Putih, so named because of the amount of bird droppings on the rocky island.

This observation is sufficient an indication as to how long the island had been associated with the locals long before the "rocky island" turned into a source of contention by another party.

What is even sadder are the circumstances that led to this unfortunate decision. All seem to point to the fact that it was out of sheer carelessness when, allegedly, the then acting state secretary of Johor blundered by replying that "the Johor government did not claim ownership of the island".

This is compounded when a letter sent by the then British governor in Butterworth to the Johor Temenggong, seeking permission to build the Horsburgh Lighthouse on Batu Putih, "could not be located".

The message is that history and heritage are vital for any sovereign nation, to keep its own future survival intact. This is especially true in this era of science and technology when the interest seems to be more what is immediate and transient. There is very little sense of history to it.

In fact, to them the history of science is of no relevance, let alone something that has nothing to do with science and technology.

That being the case, it is imperative that we resurrect our sense of history and cultural heritage locally; what's more, in the current opportunistic moments where the past is no longer considered sacred just because of the need to further one's narrow self-interests.

Now that Malaysia is reportedly keen to step up efforts to stake claims on more than 100 islands, reefs, rocks and other marine features, we must ensure proper documentation is carried out so that there is no similar Pulau Batu Putih-like incident in the future.

Any form of apathy and weakness will only see Malaysia lose more of its rightful territorial claims.

The first test to this is of course to secure the South Ledge which is in close proximity to Middle Rocks, which was awarded to Malaysia by a 15-1 ruling of the ICJ. In short, let the episode of Pulau Batu Putih be a lesson not to be repeated.

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