

Speech by Berita Harian editor Guntor Sadali, at the Berita Harian Achiever of the Year Awards ceremony on July 28, 2010

It is a fact known to all that Malays in Singapore is a minority. However this minority is quite different from other minorities in the world.

Similarly, to some, Singapore is just a red dot in this vast Asian region. But it is no ordinary red dot.

It is a grave mistake to equate size with ability, just as it is wrong to assume that being small and in the minority is to be weak and insignificant.

The recent World Cup proved this. While Spain may be the world champion, it was minnow Switzerland that became the only country in the tournament that was able to defeat Spain.

Forty-five years have passed since Singapore left Malaysia, yet every now and then we still hear non-complimentary comments from across the Causeway about the Malay community here.

The latest came from former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who casually reminded Malaysian Malays not to become like Singaporean Malays.

He did not make it clear what he actually meant, but the comment was made in the context of the possibility of Malaysian Malays losing their power in Malaysia.

Again he did not specify what type of power, but it could safely be interpreted as political power.

Now, what could have happened to the Malays here in the last four decades? What could have driven Dr Mahathir to voice his concern and to caution the Malaysian Malays? I wonder.

The Malay community in Singapore, of course, know what has become of us here.

First and foremost, we have become a completely different community from what we were 45 years ago. We have developed our own identity and philosophy of life that are distinct from our relatives across the Causeway.

We may wear the same clothes, eat the same food, speak the same language and practise the same culture. However, the similarities end there.

We are now a society that uphold the philosophy of wanting to stand on our own feet, or what is known in Malay as 'berdikari' or 'berdiri atas kaki sendiri'.

We do not believe in being spoon-fed or being too dependent on government help. In other words, we do not have a crutch mentality.

We firmly believe that a community with such a crutch mentality will soon become a "two M" community – the first 'M' stands for 'manja' (spoilt), and the second for 'malas' (lazy).

We definitely do not want to be labelled as a pampered and lazy community.

That is why our Malay community here constantly work hard to raise funds to build our own mosques, madrasahs and other buildings in expensive and land-scarce Singapore.

Over the years we have raised millions of dollars to become proud owners of these buildings.

Through our own efforts and with the help of other organisations, we have also helped the needy not only financially, but also in equipping them with new skills so that they can earn their living.

For Dr Mahathir, however, all that we have done and achieved so far are not good enough. He takes a negative view of our changed attitudes and different mindset, and has therefore cautioned Malaysian Malays not to be like us.

What about power?

For Malays in Singapore, power is not about wielding the keris. For us, knowledge is power. In fact we believe that knowledge is THE real power.

The constant emphasis by the community on the importance of education and acquiring knowledge has led to the formation of institutions such as Mendaki, Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), the Prophet Mohamad Birthday Memorial Scholarship Board (LBKM) and many others.

These self-help organisations not only provide financial help to needy students, but also strive to nurture our students to their full potential. At the same time, these organisations help to tackle various social ills faced by the community.

Again, we do these all on our own.

Malay children here attend the same schools as other Singaporeans with a shared aim - to obtain a holistic education and, of course, achieve good examination results.

Yes, it is tough. Like all other children, our Malay students have no choice but to work hard. It is a reality of life in Singapore that we have come to accept - that there is certainly no short cut to success.

We do not believe in getting any special treatment, because it would only reduce the value of our achievements and lower our dignity.

The meritocratic system that we practise here is, without doubt, a tough system but it helps us to push ourselves and prevent us from becoming 'manja' and 'malas'.

Still, Dr Mahathir and some Malay leaders across the Causeway do not like the way we do things here and have therefore warned Malaysian Malays not to be like us.

On our part, there is certainly no turning back.

Meritocracy has proven to be a good and fair system. It pushes us to work hard and makes us proud of our achievements. We can see how it has benefitted us by looking at the growing number of doctors, lawyers, magistrates, engineers, corporate leaders and other professionals among us.

It is the successes and achievements of some of these people that Berita Harian wants to highlight and celebrate when we launched this Achiever Award 12 years ago.

Tonight, we have another role model to present to our community.

So, the question is: Shouldn't our friends and relatives across the Causeway be like us – Malays in Singapore?

It is definitely not for us to suggest or decide. And we too have no intention of asking our own community if we would like to be like them either, because we have already chosen our very own path for the future.

We, the Malays in Singapore, should be proud of our achievements, because we have attained them through hard work.

It is true that what we have achieved so far may not be the best, and that we are still lagging behind the other races. There are large pockets in our community facing various social problems.

We have achieved so much, and yet there is still a long way to go. But we should not despair.

We can do a lot more on our own if the community stay united and cohesive. In critical issues, we should speak with one voice.

We need to help and strengthen each other while at the same time reach out to the other communities in multi-racial, multi-religious Singapore. A successful and prosperous Singapore can only mean a successful and prosperous Malay community.

Can we do it? Well, to borrow US President Barack Obama's campaign slogan, "Yes, we can".