

COMMENT

Societies need historical literacy

MULTI-FACETED: No single account of one perspective captures the complexity of the past

LESSER leaders cannot effectively lead citizens who have mastery of historical thinking. Societies with a critical mass of citizens who have historical literacy raise the bar of leadership. Great leaders have a sense of history and use history to give meaning to their leadership. They understand the historical significance, of ideas, persons, institutions, and events.

Intuitively or in studied ways, leaders have insights regarding continuity and change, the causes and consequences of decisions and actions of historical actors.

They understand well their destiny in world history, in national, institutional, or organisational history and in the history of ideas, inventions or in wars and peace.

How we know about the past is equally important as what we know

about the past. When politicians or other casual historians interpret the past in revisionist ways, with facile opinions, the people can thoughtfully evaluate the reliability of such accounts when they have historical thinking skills.

Historical literacy based on the contents of local, national, and world history should be mastered by all. Understanding mankind's history in broad historical perspectives nurtures understanding of the common lot and destiny of mankind.

When people learn about the coming of Islam to Malaysia, or the coming of the Indians, Arabs, Chinese, Portuguese, and Dutch, they have to exercise historical imagination based on evidence.

In more recent times, historians and journalists analysed the whys and wherefores of the riots of May 13, 1969 or happenings during the 13th General Election last year.

Historical thinking skills enable people to weigh the truthfulness, accuracy, incompleteness, and partialness of such-like accounts.

Historical thinking tells us that no single account of one perspective captures the complexity of the past. We get closer to the past to

retrieve, construct a more accurate picture of what happened and what it meant when we analyse, challenge, and interrogate significant historical events from multiple perspectives, and examine the primary sources of evidence as well.

Historical thinking distinguishes between immediate, proximate and long-term causes and effects and relationships in a historical context. The mode of historical thought helps people establish chronological thinking, time order, or periodisation in constructing a narrative, identifying patterns of historical succession and duration.

Historical comprehension allows for the appreciation of historical perspectives and guides assessment of the credibility of facts and the central significance of historical events.

For any event, there is the interplay of ideas, individuals, and motives and judgment on all of these is suspended until there is interrogation, historical argumentation, and debates, corroborated evidence and marshalling of contextual knowledge.

The discipline of history has generated the intellectual protocols of

historical evidence gathering, explanation, analysis, interpretation.

There is always the acknowledgement of gaps in available records and contradictions in data, evidence, and interpretation. History nurtures Meta cognition-thinking about thinking, reflection, articulation of reason and rationalisation, robust analyses, the exercise of problem solving and evidence-based historical imagination.

Understanding and practising the craft of the historian elevates and enhances a person's intellectual prowess. History promotes questioning, challenging, in-depth probing, communication, inquiry focus and culture of authentic search for "the truth out there."

History allows for persuasive understanding of past, and creatively infusing disparate, relevant evidence from primary works. History makes people understand that societies or peoples being different do not mean being inferior, but appreciate that people at different stages of development, are worthy of being valued, for humans do have shared human needs.

The drivers of change which are commonly recognised are scientific-technological changes, cultural changes, ideological-political changes, globalisation and localisation as well as Qualityocracy and the World Class Agenda.

Change which may introduce alienation elements and the speed of change itself create disruption of traditional order in society and organisation. Everywhere, people have to make sense of changes, continuities, and discontinuities.

The ordinary person and the intellectual elite alike do have assumptions regarding change and continuity and recognise various schools of thought and theories of history as follows: Cyclical, Linear-Progress, Teleological, Challenge and Response, Chance and Accident, Grand Design, Great Ideas-Philosophic History, Great Man, Everyman-Ordinary Lives, Social Forces, Geographic-Geopolitical-Ecological.

Each of these exciting theories of history provides clarity and depth of insights in frames of understanding regarding what happened in history.

An enlightened society must have clear perspectives of its various interpretations and explanations of history or history in the making.

With historical tools of thoughts and cognizant of its manifest destiny, a society can confidently move fast forward learning lessons from history, dispensing and asserting justice and focused in remedying past injustices and injuries to individuals and groups.

▣ iabaiw@yahoo.com



**Datuk
Dr Ibrahim
Ahmad Bajunida**
is deputy
vice-chancellor
of INTI Laureate
International
University