

Article

RUMAH KITA

By **Ismail Johari Othman**

Over 30 years ago, legendary singer and unity icon, Sudirman Haji Arshad wrote and recorded a tribute song entitled *Bapak*. One of the lines in the song was “...*Bapak...ini rumah kita...pusaka peninggalan...untuk keluarga yang merdeka...*”, which literally means “this is our house inherited from the founding fathers for us to stay independently”. The house he referred to is Malaysia, which celebrated its 60th anniversary on 31 August 2017. If one is working, 60 is the mandatory retirement age. However, many may think that with the current advancements, many more milestones can be gained. Based on the aforementioned, this article intends to reflect visible broad changes that have taken place and some possible approaches that could be considered as far as leadership skills are concerned.

Like any other man-made structure, the house wears down over time. Some parts may need replacing, some need rearranging, and some require a facelift. It is quite natural for those who live in the house to have differing opinions over house improvements or arrangements; be it now and in the future. Perhaps such differences are influenced by the individual

experiences that one has with the house. Be that as it may, it is still *rumah kita*.

Of course, the house has its limitations. Some leave the house for greener pastures – often with the determination to contribute back to the house in the future. Some have no choice but to stay through thick and thin. Those who are more privileged can come and go at their convenience. In such a dynamic environment, diverse sentiments over the house are bound to be observed. In the pursuit of a shared ideal perspective, respect must always be upheld as this is *rumah kita*.

Technology certainly help and at times, does wonders. Gone are the days where what goes in and out of the house is visible to the naked eye. For example, parents used to know practically all their children's friends as there was only one house telephone that was shared by everyone. This is a stark contrast to the information communication technology we have today – which is often mobile, personalised, direct, and rapid. Such a change may probably create some discomfort as it is human nature to have a sense of control in their day to day life. Like it or not, this is *rumah kita*.

Rumah terbuka or open house is one of the central features in the Malaysian way of life, often observed during the month-long celebration of Eid¹. Such a welcoming nature attracts many guests to come over. While some do leave after reaching certain accomplishments, some have chosen to stay put. Some, who initially came individually, would even bring their family. There is a saying that the more the merrier, but some may argue otherwise – the fewer, the better fare. Diverse, and at times extreme or parochial views are becoming a norm. Therefore, acknowledging these contrarian perspectives is necessary. These trends are observed in certain developed nations, judging from their recent election results. It seems that these challenges will be around in times to come with limited options for policy response in sight. Whatever it is, this is *rumah kita*.

Apparently, one of the things that one is unable to choose in life is its neighbour – though this may not apply in a more affluent segment of society where birds of a feather flock together. Geographically, Malaysia is in one of the most vibrant region in the planet. The region's young population, pleasant climate, and favourable maritime and airspace connectivity has somewhat attracted a huge amount of investment of late from other parts of the world. Having said that, such dynamism in this region can be traced as far as five centuries ago –

where it consisted of several rather fragmented polity as compared to a group of a few independent nations, as observed today. In consideration of these different dynamics, the understandings that were reached in the past probably lacked solid guidance for generations to follow. To some extent, it may have influenced the interactions in this region, where at times it could be challenging. But this is where *rumah kita* exists.

Now, what lies ahead for *rumah kita*? Lately, the call for *meaning* seems to be louder than before. Questions, such as “*why are we doing this, why not that, why now*” are heard more often. Based on the earlier discussion, such urges from the public poses some challenges for leaders. Perhaps, this explains why the initiatives to listen, engage, and collaborate are being intensified². The feedback, criticisms, views, and alternatives are tirelessly reflected, often reconciled, with past trends. The selection of the song³ *Di Sini Lahirnya Sebuah Cinta* as the theme for last year's Independence Day is a move in the right direction to encourage reflection for meaning in a creative way.

The rigorous reflection on the meaning could lead to *clarity*. Clarity⁴ of ideas played a huge role in the ground-breaking days of *Amanah Saham Nasional* in 1981. Nobody would have thought that such level of sophistication in the scheme could be

¹ Open house is also held in conjunction with other festivities such as Chinese New Year, Deepavalli and Christmas.

² The underlying spirit of National Blue Ocean Strategy and *Merakyatkan Perkhidmatan Awam* (Humanising the Public Service).

³ Literally means “this is where the love is found”. Originally a song entitled *Warisan* (Heritage) by Sudirman Haji Arshad.

⁴<http://www2.rsog.com.my/index.php?lang=en& m=content&cid=1662>

positively embraced. This eventually shaped the households⁵ of *rumah kita*.

Thirdly, leaders are also confronted with the call for openness. Such a quality can help to bring about trust and intimacy. Unlike before, technology often bypasses hierarchy, which is a huge challenge to the exclusivity of information that leaders are used to having. It is interesting to observe that even the royal households are showing an exemplary gesture of openness through occasional press statements and utilisation of social media.

Attitude-wise, being *progressive* has a lot of plus points. Hang Tuah was observed⁶ to possess such attitude. In *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Hang Tuah⁷ was claimed to have mastered 12 languages and displayed a strong penchant for continued education. Indeed, education has been Malaysia's priority since the early days of the nation.

Finally, a *pragmatic* mind-set is observed⁸ as a necessity to bring the nation forward given the dynamics of today's environment. History has shown that such a mind-set has contributed enormously to Malaysian policy responses in the past. Based on the foregoing, it appears that *rumah kita* has undergone considerable changes since it was founded 60 years ago

– be it from outlook, dynamism, composition, and surrounding. The writing on the wall is that these changes are likely to be multiplied in the future. Needless to say, the destruction of *rumah kita* is the last thing on everyone's mind. As reflected in an award-winning book⁹, losing a house can be severely traumatic. To ensure that *rumah kita* stands and shines for many more years to come, a clear and shared meaning is seemingly non-negotiable. It is easier said than done as such a journey could be painful, considering that opening-up can be an uncomfortable experience to some. To start with, one should have a progressive attitude and pragmatic mind-set.

In Razak School of Government, regular discourses are organised to gather as much input as possible; not only to feed policy responses but to inculcate a culture of openness and provide an avenue for fellow countrymen to get acquainted with each other, meaningfully. Executive education programmes are designed in such a way to promote deep reflection on contemporary issues and closely related to leadership. As profoundly pointed out by our National Laureate Usman Awang, "...*tapi, anakku, hidup senantiasa mengembara...*"¹⁰. God bless Malaysia – *Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!*

⁵ Strategic industries are led domestically through takeover from foreigners thus result in the creation of technical and professional job opportunities.

⁶<http://www.rsog.com.my/index.php?lang=en& m=content&cid=1598>

⁷ A key figure in the 15th century Melaka Sultanate. In 2001, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* was registered into the UNESCO Memory of the World and to this day, remains a profound product of its age and its system of values.

⁸<http://www.rsog.com.my/index.php?lang=en& m=content&cid=1562>

⁹ Desmond, Matthew. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: BDWY Broadway, 2017. Print.

¹⁰ Literally means "but my son, life is a journey". Awang, Usman. *Duri dan Api, Sajak-Sajak Pilihan* 1961 – 1966. Petaling Jaya: Malayan Printers, 1966. Web.