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What does age have to do with it?



KOH LAY CHIN

THEY both chuckled about age at a Singapore-hosted dinner two weeks ago.

"I would like to think (Lee Hsien Loong and I) are young, but actually we are not that young. We are relatively young, we are not part of that generation, we should not be encumbered with the baggage of history," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said during the genial event which took place during his official visit to the republic.

He was talking about leaders being courageous enough to represent a new generation of Malaysians and Singaporeans, one that would support a strong and productive relationship.

Najib is 55 and Lee is 57.

Among Malaysia's six prime ministers, our current leader is actually not the youngest who took office.

That distinction goes to his father, Tun Abdul Razak, who became Prime Minister when he was 48 years old.

Tunku Abdul Rahman was 54, Tun Hussein Onn was also 54, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was 56 and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was 64.

Among leaders in the Asean region there are Indonesia's Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who is 59, Philippines' Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, 62, and Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, also 62.

The socialist republics, Vietnam and Laos, have Nguyen Minh Triet, 66, and Lieutenant-General Choum-

maly Sayasone, 73, heading their governments respectively.

For the military dictatorship that is Myanmar, there is 76-year-old Senior General Than Shwe, the region's oldest commander-in-chief.

The "baby" of the grouping is Thailand's Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who is from the upper classes, Oxford-educated, and 44 years old.

Judging by these numbers it would be true that along with our two closest neighbours, Malaysia is part of that international club that boasts of relatively younger leaders.

What significance is age?

It brings about discussions about experience versus youthfulness, the fearless versus the jaded, the cautious versus the gung-ho.

Leaders in their fifties are from the "baby boomer" years, the generation born during the mid-20th century, after the world wars.

They were teenagers stepping into adulthood when the civil rights and women's movements were ascendant in the United States, and when its beloved leaders John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated.

Also in this generation are Britain's current and former Prime Ministers Gordon Brown (58) and Tony Blair (56), France's Nicolas Sarkozy and Germany's Angela Merkel, who are both 54 years old. But unless one has been the proverbial frog under the coconut shell, it is clear that the current global influential hot shots are even younger.

Hardly a description of them misses out the words "youthful" or "dynamic".

At the forefront is America's Barack Obama, who is 47.

Tory leader David Cameron, who calls his Labour rival a political dinosaur, is 42.

The gems of the developed European nations, Sweden and Denmark have, respectively, Fredrik Reinfeldt (43) and Lars Rasmussen (45).

Other worthy mentions who are considered young, or relatively so, are Bolivia's Evo Morales at 49, Australia's Kevin Rudd, 51, Netherland's Jan Peter Balkenendem, 53, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez at 54, and the current luminary of Tanzania, President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete.

Kikwete, the first African head of state to visit the Obama White House recently, is 59.

He came in like a gust of fresh air in Tanzania, a country fraught with its own baggage, and four years after his installation he still maintains high ratings in popularity.

He has dissolved his entire cabinet after a corruption scandal, built 1,500 new secondary schools in two years, brokered peace in neighbouring African countries and enhanced the country's capacity to deal with HIV/AIDS.

With a HIV-testing programme, a remarkable 11,000 people volunteered to test for the virus on its launch day, with Kikwete and his wife the first to be tested.

Youth and vigour is enchanting in itself but as Kikwete shows, it is actually new ideas, fearless reforms and meaningful gestures that mark change in all its dizzying effects.

Yes, new and revolutionary ideas came with young leaders.

Among the revered are Nelson Mandela, King and Mahatma Gandhi, who developed the very best of their ideas in their thirties.

But it is new ways of thinking and doing that are remembered, not age.

It is when Australia's Rudd, uses the word "sorry" three times in a heartfelt official apology to the indigenous Aboriginal population for past wrongs, a big break from previous administrations' policies.

It is when Morales actually kneels down and shines shoes for some Bolivian children (shoeshine boys who are ashamed of their job) and cuts his salary by 57 per cent.

It is when Chavez is humiliated with a significant rejection of his proposal to end term limits and tighten socialism's grip, and pretty much

surprises everyone by saying, albeit rather glumly, that the people's decision will be upheld with the utmost respect.

Youth is by no means the guarantee or exclusive domain for young or new ideas.

Benjamin Franklin was 70 when he signed the American Declaration of Independence.

New ideas are also not necessarily the best thing to happen to a country since sliced bread.

Adolf Hitler became ruler of Germany when he was just 44, and we all know the repulsive ideas that were germinating within him.

Charmers like Josef Stalin, Idi Amin and Pol Pot were 44, 46 and 48 years respectively when they became heads of their states.

Age, furthermore, does not operate in a vacuum, it is shaped by experiences, influences, will and timing. George W. Bush was 55 when he came into office, and is just a month-and-a-half younger than Bill Clinton.

Both are diametrically different from one another.

So it's not really that politicians or their ideas age like fine French wine or sour like milk.

As Victor Hugo said, many decades ago, nothing is as powerful as "an idea whose time has come".

It's whether leaders seize the opportunity that matters.

■ laych@nst.com.my