

Without Fear or Favour



Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim.

*There are hopeful and exciting days ahead for all in Malaysia who love the arts and culture as JUNE H.L. WONG and VERONICA SHUNMUGAM find out in an exclusive interview with the new Arts, Culture and Heritage Minister **Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim.***

THE appointment of Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim as the Minister of Arts, Culture and Heritage came as a surprise to many. After all, his background was law, and he has not been previously associated with the arts, culture or heritage.

But there is a "softer" side to Dr Rais and truth be told, this man has long declared his own heritage in a most visible way: his house with its soaring *Minangkabau* * roofs, which he built in 1975, is a well-known landmark in Ampang Jaya, Kuala Lumpur. Not only is he a passionate defender of the national language but he sees himself, along with his ministry officers, as the custodians of the "Malaysian inner psyche".

In a nearly two-hour interview, he revealed an impressive familiarity with wide-ranging issues affecting the arts, culture and heritage. Yes, he will wield the law, but only as a weapon to protect, define and guide a sphere that has long been left to fend for itself and was often subjected to arbitrary governing.

Datuk Seri, since you have said you welcome views from relevant parties to help you as you formulate plans for the new ministry, will you have an open channel - perhaps a weekly meeting - for them to present their ideas and feedback?

We could have regular meetings, and a dual-carriage way of thinking

should be encouraged. The arts are something that is not stagnant, and it is a field in which every Malaysian should have a say. It is not regulated too much, in terms of the law. It is quite a different field for me, after having been in Law (as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department) for the last five years, and coming from a legal background. (Yet) this is a field which has always been close to (my heart) because I enjoy the arts.

My first observation is that Malaysians are not a very arts-orientated community. Therefore, the arts-conscious segment of our community ought to come forward and let us know how they feel about things - (in terms of) facilities, deeper involvement in the arts, culture and heritage of the country, and to determine the future. There is a lot to be done.

You have indicated that you've been asked to handle this ministry as there are some urgent issues that need your attention. You also mentioned that you would be here for two years?

Well, the Prime Minister has told me that we ought to lay the foundation for a more sublime culture. It is very easy to talk about arts, culture and heritage but there are so many intangible things within the parameters of this subject.

On the one hand, some quarters think there is wisdom in separating tourism from arts and culture. We could pursue arts, culture and heritage independently of tourism's commercial demands. On the other hand, there is the school of thought that says that if you don't have arts, culture and heritage, what are you going to show the tourists? To me, the marriage of the two must still be there so we will still help the tourism part.

My predecessor has done a good job, I believe, in the commercial aspects but I am more concerned about bringing arts, culture and heritage to all levels of society - in the schools, Felda schemes, new villages. That's because every Malaysian community should have a share of the cultural heritage in all its representations, and it shouldn't be urban-centric.

But what kind of artistic pursuits and cultural interests should we imbue in the system? Now, that's not an easy question to answer. I can not say that we can do it within two or two-and-a-half years.

Having said that, I think all the three segments of this ministry welcome views from the public. I cannot say that my officers alone are



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the experts. So, we will tap the public sentiment and expression.

But why the two-year or two-and-a-half-year tenure? (The former Arts, Culture and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir held office for four-and-a-half years)

That is the (usual) tenure, and ministers hop from one portfolio to another. I don't want to be too ambitious but I want to be quite tenacious in what I see as important to this ministry. We are the custodians of the Malaysian inner psyche, so to speak. I do not want to see too much of an overbearing by one racial denomination. At the same time, I cannot please everybody.

Would you say that heritage is the ministry's first target?

Heritage is a new additive to this ministry (and) it has not been spelt out. My question to the framers of this new title is, "Do you know what heritage is?" This is the same question I ask myself. (To me) heritage has to be determined beyond buildings. It should also include artefacts pertaining to the language - poetry, the artistry involved in creative writing, the pantun (a Malay poetic form) and others. On the other hand, you have heritage left by the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* (*Peranakans*, descendants of the early Chinese immigrants, who spread through Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia) as well as the orang asli. So, how do you "cement" all these into what we call the Malaysian heritage and culture?

If all this is accepted, obviously we have a heavy task ahead. A bit of my experience between 1974 and 1976 (as Parliamentary Secretary to the then Culture, Youth and Sports Ministry; Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, coincidentally, was Head of Youth) could be of help.

In terms of performance, heritage such as the *manora*, *mak yong*, *wayang kulit* *axlú ma/r/peter* have been decimated, especially in the last 10 years when PAS issued proscriptions on these forms in Kelantan and, later, Terengganu. Will your ministry help revive these art forms?

A definite "Yes". We would like to put on the map again what has been lost. This is where I would say politics and culture don't seem to mix in the hands of those responsible in the last decade.

The other part is, of course, the buried past of the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* in Penang and Malacca, and the Sanskrit-ised elements of the culture. These are all very rich. I think studies must be encouraged, and we would like authoritative, serious people to go into these fields and produce research for us.

The heritage element in *Bahasa Kebangsaan* (the national language) has (also) been left out for so long. We don't mention much the poetry and literary achievement in the language. And most glaring is how language is being spoken in the country. That can also be a question for (the) Education (Ministry) but in the heritage department, we would like to say: Do not make the language so *rojak* (mixed) so as to make it unintelligible in the future. The French don't mix their language with other words. But in Malaysia, half our sentences are in English while the other half is in Malay. In the end, we don't pick up the good parts in either language.

Now, there are people who would quarrel with me and say "Aha! That is not heritage!" But to me, it is. A language well nurtured and well-parametered within the cultural and artistic module could become a symbol of pride for the country.

I've already told my officers: "When you give briefings, either you give it in Malay or you give it in English. Don't make a *rojak* out of it."

Prior to this interview, *StarMag* sent out a mass e-mail requesting a "wish list" from nearly 100 practitioners, workers and groups in the arts and culture fields. Feedback has shown a strong demand for a more comprehensive inclusion of performing and visual arts in the school syllabuses - from primary right up to the tertiary level. How will you work with the Education Ministry on this?

Well, a syllabus is a very touchy subject, and it is not fair for us to say that we make the arts part and parcel of it. But it is fair, I believe, to say that some segments of the arts must be planted in the curriculum. We should not overburden the pupils and the schools but the lack of visual or performing arts within the schools is very evident. Even the recitation of beautiful pieces of literature is no longer heard.

When I was in school, the teachers used to compel us to learn chunks of beautiful poetry from Shakespeare as well as from arrangements by Malay writers, for example. But now, that sort of inclination is no longer present in the system. We will have a discussion

with the Education Ministry. Although we have had some programmes with them, I believe we have to evaluate some of the modules again.

Will the ministry set up an arts council to handle needs such as grants, training and regular big-scale arts events? (A document on the setting up of an arts council entitled *Majlis Seni Malaysia* was drafted by theatre practitioners Marion D'Cruz, Faridah Merican and Ann Lee, and sent to the former Arts, Culture and Tourism Ministry two years ago.)

You hit the nail on the head. This was our decision (recently) and I have stressed the need that we should give scholarships and encourage grants. We should expose local and regional talents, and even sponsor those who are oozing with talent to go to the best art schools. This is not only for the fine arts - we stress the need for music and cultural pursuits.

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These grants must also be spelt out well beforehand and must be part of the (arts) calendar in Malaysia. We will involve the corporate world as well.

What sort of money are we looking at here?

That's a sensitive question and I haven't looked at the budget yet. But we'll find a way to get the grants and allocations.

My detractors have termed this ministry to be a *rugi* ("loss") ministry. Of course, (that shows) they don't understand what arts, culture and heritage is about.

Datuk Seri, when you say detractors, do you mean within Government or outside or both?

Well, both. I cannot say they are only from outside. Even within, they say "You're going to the museum, good bye!" That is the "dilapidated" sense of arts, culture and heritage that we have in the country. They don't look at it from the positive point of view, how it benefits the nation and the people.

Can shutterbugs look forward to more opportunities in photography arts?

Certainly. I'll be biased here, being a shutterbug myself. *Seni foto* (arts of photography) will become an integral aspect in the modern art expression. I would strongly urge the newspapers to continue to

recognise the best photographers and to produce coffee table books on Malaysia, for example, *A Day in the life of a Malaysian*, *Life in the New Villages* or *Life in the Felda Scheme*. Most of such books are done by outsiders. Very few of us are interested in doing it because it is very tedious work. But we will encourage it in a big way now that digital photography is available to almost everyone.

Are you into digital photography yourself?

Yes. I carry the camera wherever I go, hoping for a good click. Sometimes out of twenty, I get one that I like. (Digital photography) is an art by itself but you have to know the software as well, such as Photoshop and Adobe, otherwise you can't understand it. As to whether it is acceptable as an art form, that is still debatable.

Istana Budaya (Cultural Centre of the state)'s director-general Dr Hatta Azad Khan's contract ended on March 8. We've heard that he had applied for a renewal of his contract.

We need to look at it as a service matter as well as the national need for him, either to continue on the same basis or on another basis that can assist that institution. But allow me to say that he should not be "let go" just like that since he has a deep interest and service orientation for that institution.

So, there is no decision yet?

Not yet. I understand that he would be continually useful to us at the ministry on the whole and specifically to Istana Budaya. At the same time, we do not want to jeopardise the opportunity of others to "come up", in terms of promotion. But a personality of his calibre should always be useful to all of us and, we would like him to continue his services. We will see to it.

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*characterised by upward curves reflecting the water buffalo's horns - the Minangkabau tribe is indigenous to the highlands of West Sumatra in Indonesia.