

New dawn for science too

THE 14th General Election is now over. There is euphoria in the air and many are excited about the new era in the nation's politics. Many are hoping that the future will be positive for all. The call for change is now a reality.

The real test will come in the coming days, however. The new government has given itself the first 100 days to demonstrate to the people that it is truly embracing change – a change for the better, of course.

Already, we have heard of a move to increase freedom of the press. This is a healthy sign because, for far too long, the freedom to express one's opinions has been literally suppressed. In a global economy that is increasingly driven by innovation, the most precious commodity is the idea. Ideas are the drivers of real innovation. Opinions, on the other hand, breed ideas. So, by suppressing the opinions and views of people, the chances of generating constructive ideas are much reduced.

Ideas alone are not sufficient. They need to be converted into workable solutions which address the problems of the people and society. This is where science has a role to play. Science has the power to convert ideas into meaningful technologies that generate benefits for society and industry.

As a nation, we do have many challenges and issues begging for sustainable solutions. Science can be that potent force we can depend on to deliver the solutions.

Of course, we need the right talents and facilities to make that happen. These have been the biggest concerns of the scientific community. Not only are talents becoming scarce, support for science has also been dwindling in recent years.

The situation in the 1980s and 1990s was different. Many would not hesitate to say that these decades were the glory days for science in the country.



That was the time when science was given strong emphasis as one of the major pillars of the nation's development agenda. That was also the time when science never failed to be included as an important chapter in the nation's five-year plans.

We were also making good progress in convincing young Malaysians to choose science as a career option.

Unfortunately, the last few years have been literally retrogressive for science in Malaysia. Funding for research and development (R&D), which had just breached the one per cent of GDP mark, was suddenly cut. Universities bore the largest brunt of this cut.

I was told recently by one vice-chancellor that university lecturers were only given nine months' pay. The remaining three months would have to be sourced elsewhere. Adding salt to the wound, many experienced professors had their services terminated because of lack of funds.

We would like appeal to the new administration to rejuvenate the nation's ailing science for our own long-term good. First, restore funding to those universities that will give priority to R&D that benefits our society and not just to glibly satisfy the demand of many ranking agencies.

Second, the nation's R&D institutes must not be chaired by politicians. Get the professionals to chair R&D entities. One source of capable science professionals are readily available among the senior fellows of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia (ASM).

Even the Academy of Sciences, which was established to be the nation's leading science think tank, must be made more independent. For years now, Fellows of the Academy of Sciences have been appealing for it to be directly answerable to Parliament and not to be subservient to mundane demands of a ministry. Now is a good time to make that change.

Scientists in the country believe that the best person to make that change and bring back the glory days of S&T is Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. This is because it was during his previous tenure as PM that science had the best deal. This is the reason ASM has long paid tribute to Dr Mahathir and created the Mahathir Science Award to recognise excellence in science. Hopefully, more corporate bodies will support this award.

PROFESSOR DATUK DR AHMAD IBRAHIM
Fellow Academy of Sciences Malaysia
UCSI University