

Importance of preserving family ties

SOCIETY is never static, that is the way life goes. Everything changes with time. Some changes are for the better, and some changes are otherwise. We can choose to accept whatever changes occur, or we can decide for ourselves what changes we ought to encourage and condone and which ones to reject or prevent.

If we know certain changes will eventually have deleterious effects, it is irresponsible of us to let such changes happen. A sane society would try its best to prevent unhealthy developments from taking root in its midst.

In Malaysia we fervently desire to progress as much as those countries in the West. We want development because it would give us a higher standard of living as what the developed countries are enjoying now. They have better means and are stronger than us. Without the strength that comes from development and progress, we would be easily dominated by the developed countries. If we are progressive we are less likely to be oppressed. That is one reason for pursuing development.

If we look closely at the progressive societies of the West we can uncover several negative aspects. One of these is the breakdown of the family as an institution. In the West the family is sometimes non-existent. Certain groups of people in the West believe so much in personal individuality and independence that they avoid marriage. They live alone, or enter into temporary relationships without ever marrying. They are not tied down by anything and this gives them freedom to do everything they like.

Even should they marry, some do not wish to have

Translation of the full text of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech at the launching of the National Family Day 1990 in Kuala Lumpur last Sunday.

children at all. And even though they may have children, when the children become teenagers the parents do not feel responsible towards their offspring and the children conversely reject parental control. Often, the children leave their parents and lead their own lives apart. Both sides wish to sever family ties.

There are families in the West which are nuclear families, limited only to the parents and children. The grandparents, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews and cousins are not recognised as family members. Those outside the immediate nuclear family unit are regarded as outsiders and not as members of the family. Because of this, what happens to the distant relatives would not be the responsibility of anyone with kinship ties to them.

In such a society, when the parents reach old age they usually are left by themselves; their children no longer care for them. They are put into nursing homes and stay there until they die. The State is given responsibility for taking care of these rejected parents.

Yes, the Government can build Old Folks Homes. But the Government cannot give the aged the love and care they so badly need. It is pitiful to find these parents being cast away like so much discarded baggage by their own offspring whom they had brought up with so much care and concern. But this is what happens in developed societies where the family as an institution has broken down.

Among the teenagers, the lack of parental control encourages them to run wild,

making them disrespectful and easily influenced by alcohol, drugs and crime, such that some of these wayward youngsters have been known to kill merely for the "thrill" of it.

Clearly then, development has no meaning when the family unit breaks down. What is the use of material advancement when our daily lives are unsafe, when society is depressed and over-run by mental imbalance? Although we see the people of these developed societies enjoying themselves, their enjoyment does not stem from emotional tranquility. Their enjoyment is achieved through "escapism" from the emotional stresses they are suffering from. Such societies are burdened with massive social problems. Drug abuse is rampant in Western society as a result of the disintegrating family unit.

That the developed societies are facing these problems doesn't mean we in the developing world are immune from such problems also. In truth, the poorer and backward societies also face insurmountable problems, in terms of extreme stress and emotional pressures, and widespread poverty.

Our efforts towards material well-being and modernisation should continue. What is important is to prevent ourselves from being trapped by the trend of disintegrating social institutions like breakdown of the family.

We should make conscious and positive efforts to strengthen family ties and prevent the extended family from being replaced by the nuclear family.

This is why the Malaysian Government gives serious attention towards the family

as a social institution which needs to be strengthened and maintained. We would like the happy family to be the goal of everyone, rich and poor alike.

The aim of the National Family Day is to remind ourselves of how important the family is as a unit and as an institution in Malaysian society. We have already noticed how the family has begun to deteriorate in this rapidly developing country.

The rural-urban migration and migration from one State to another for fulfilment of personal needs has to some extent severed family ties. But the first generation of migrants still remember their ties to the village and family. Because of this, at least once a year they endure the inconvenience of returning to their village to renew the family relationship.

We have almost reached the second generation, the generation born and raised in the towns. In the towns we do not live next door to our relatives. Our neighbours are total strangers and our contact with them is not as close as our relationship with our families. The ties between the second generation of urban dwellers and their rural relatives have come unbound. It is possible that the desire for returning to the kampung during major festivals would diminish.

Also, the urbanites do not foster contact with members of their own generation in the urban environment. Families usually live far apart from other relatives, each family keeping very much to itself.

The family as an institution has begun to show signs of regress. The third generation rural-urban migrants

might entirely sever ties with their rural family members. Besides that, family relationships in the urban areas are deteriorating further.

In the towns, attitudes are changing. The sense of responsibility towards the family is becoming tenuous. The desire for independence from parental control has encouraged many youths who have started working to live apart from their parents even though they are still single. It is only natural that when these young people marry, as newly-wed couples they would want to live in their own homes. In the old days, the newly-weds would live with in-laws and parents. This new trend of living apart from the parents and in-laws further erodes family ties.

The trends which we see now would eventually adversely affect the family as an institution unless we take steps to maintain the integrity of the family. We in Malaysia do not want to go the way of the Western welfare state where the aged become the responsibility of the State, to be placed in nursing homes till they die. Unless we strengthen and encourage close-knit family ties, we would see manifestations of undesirable incidents where the old who have died are buried without being attended to by even a single family member.

Our stress on development of the family as an institution is not limited to just the individual family ties. In Malaysia we are living in the larger society, a multi-cultural society that can be regarded as a family also. Even though the inter-community relationship is not as strong as the relationship between family members, its importance in ensuring the peace and stability of the country cannot be under-rated.

Because of this, it is vital for us to foster close and cordial relationships within the larger family which is Malaysian society. We will not lose by doing so. It is a fact that in the towns where we live our neighbours no longer comprise members of our family, nor are they members of our own ethnic group, nor do they share the same beliefs as ours. Nevertheless, in any emergency the sense of mutual help between neighbours is still important. If a person does not cultivate a good relationship with his or her neighbour, in some cases he cannot expect help when in need.

In Malaysia certain quarters detest the word "assimilation". Yet even though we dislike assimilation, we should not reject the need for stronger ties even between individuals of different ethnic groups. Inter racial marriage should be something acceptable, as long as it does not go against certain cultural or religious sensitivities. When such marriages take place those involved should not cut off relationships with their original families.

I would like to say here that this is not a Government policy. It is only my personal opinion, considering that there is a member of my family who is not of my own ethnic group. But I accept him as a member of the extended family.

The National Family Day holds a greater and more meaningful purpose for this country. The family and family relationship should be the basis of Malaysian society especially now that the country is enjoying rapid development and progress. We believe that the traditional family institution should be preserved. By doing so we can avoid the unhealthy trends that have swept many developed societies in the West and in other places.