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Fortitude and calmness needed

AND surely We shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and crops; but give glad tidings to the steadfast,

Who say, when a misfortune striketh them: Lo! We are Allah's and lo! Unto Him we are returning.

Such are they on whom are blessings from their Lord, and mercy. Such are the rightly guided.

(Al-Baqarah, 155-157)

This year's assembly follows immediately after celebrations to mark the 40th anniversary of Independence. Our country's independence is closely linked with Umno because it was Umno which mobilised the Malays and the people as a whole to liberate the nation from the shackles of colonialism.

In 40 years, we have built a stable and successful nation, governed under a system of parliamentary democracy, where the people live in freedom from fear and oppression, where they are free to engage in religious practices, enjoy freedom of speech and movement, where all citizens share the responsibility of maintaining harmony, participate in political life and economic and social development and no one is marginalised.

We celebrate our independence with a confidence bolstered by a sense of pride over our achievements. Our founding fathers could not have imagined their descendants would come this far in such a short time. Neither could they have imagined that Malaysia would achieve such reknown and command such respect throughout the world.

Freedom should rightfully mean that we are free to govern ourselves in the manner we think best for the benefit of the people. It should mean also that we are free to manage our economy and implement policies that would bring the most good to the citizenry. But the reality is that we live in an interconnected, interdependent world.

The Malaysian economy is but a vein in a global network. Not only must we respond to internal demands, we must also answer external challenges. We must therefore maintain a constant watch on international economic currents.

In presenting the national Budget three years ago, we exhorted the people to be mindful of the lesson given by the Quran in its retelling of the story of Joseph and his brethren: how seven years of plenty were followed by seven lean years. How we have to be on guard against the possibility of economic panic after having for so long enjoyed the comforts brought about by vibrant and unprecedented growth.

An economic crisis could occur suddenly due to internal factors or external pressures. We all know what is happening with the stock market and the value of the ringgit against the American dollar.

The sudden drop in the value of local stocks had nothing to do with the profitability of our companies or with the other economic fundamentals. The main cause, in the early stages, was the collapse of the Thai monetary system. What started out as a spray has developed into a storm, wreaking havoc on all the Asean economies. Even Hong Kong is not spared.

Are these events the normal consequences of the weaknesses of the region's economies? There is no shortage of economic experts and market analysts who would have us believe that the region's economic and currency crisis is strictly the result of internal factors. Although it is true that certain economies within the region are brittle due to internal

factors, it is not true in the case of our own economy.

We believe there is an international syndicate plotting to destabilise the regional economy. The region's rapid development in the last two decades has attracted the attention of the developed world and caused a certain amount of envy.

More than that, indeed, our development has terrified those countries which now worry that the strength of our region would undermine the economic dominance of the big powers. Furthermore, China is moving towards an open market.

The West hates to see countries in this region free themselves from the economic stranglehold it has skilfully established and manipulated during the colonial period. Nothing pleases them more than to see the perpetuation of the vast economic gap between East and West.

In truth, we are fighting a form of economic war deliberately waged by western syndicates and the battlefields are our stock and currency markets. How do we deal with it? First of all, we must face the reality that our economy is but one vein in a global network. The faster we progress, the more closely we bind ourselves to the world economy. The more markets we need for our exports, the more we have to import in terms of high technology machinery, and the more we need foreigners to invest.

Although we are in Asean, and Asean is "united" as a economic grouping, it is still apparent that the interest of individual economies is given priority to the regional economy. Hence, we are still competing with each other, whether this fact is obvious or not, for market share as well as in facing external threats. For example, we compete for foreign investment, we compete in lowering production costs, we compete in the service and tourism industries to provide more efficient and attractive services.

This has in turn given rise to differentials in the levels and speed of economic development among ourselves. Some are too fast, some too efficient and others too sluggish. And there are those just taking their first tentative steps. These disparities provide opportunities for the self-serving to disturb the stability of the regional economy.

Based on this observation, it is clear that although we have been successful in developing our individual economies, we have not, as a group, thought up a collective strategy against predators. It is clear that the attackers know this weakness and hence their current tactics is to launch successive blitzkriegs.

The Malaysian Government, aware of this action, is participating in a consortium to assist Thailand even though it is already battle-scarred.

We failed to see the battering of Thailand as part of a deliberate strategy until Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia were badly hit. It was easy for them to ram through because we had no organised defence.

Nevertheless, the onslaughts have not left us in disarray or panic. Neither are we intimidated. We are taking active measures to repulse and neutralise the attacks, which may continue unabated. We are in consultation with our Asean and other regional partners to devise a collective counter strategy.

We know how unsettling these developments are, especially to the business community. We urge fortitude and calmness in the face of these trying circumstances. It is yet another test of national perseverance, no less significant than the struggle to gain independence.

Our economic success has proven that we have the capacity to master a situation quickly and move forward with despatch. The situation calls for coolness and deliberation.

An important ingredient is resilience. We cannot act hastily; every move we make must be part of a well-planned strategy so that every step brings about a positive development.

These gloomy conditions are temporary. Those who dump shares on the market are driven by greed and their aim is to make extraordinary profits out of an extraordinary situation.

The Government has imposed tighter restrictions on trading in the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange. We are certain that this group will sustain heavy losses if they continue to sell our stocks on the cheap because our subsequent measures will prevent them from re-acquiring those shares at even lower prices. Knowing their concupiscence, they will come swarming back like flies when the market stabilises.

In the meantime, we will continue to mobilise local funds in order to ensure that the share market truly reflects the fundamental strengths of our companies and the economy as a whole.

The Government is aware that there is a small group trying to take advantage of the situation and are prepared even to degrade themselves to feed their greed and concupiscence at the expense of jeopardising the national economy. They are not only prepared to become serving wenches for the stock market pirates, some would go as far as to betray the nation by disseminating all kinds of lies, innuendos and rumours aimed at eroding confidence in our economy and political leadership.

Despite our understandable anguish and burning anger towards these miniscule faction, we have to exercise great forbearance and act rationally. "Verily, God is with those who persevere." The most crucial thing to do now is not to apprehend and punish these traitors, but to strive to restore stability of the stock market and the value of the ringgit.

In facing the current difficulties, we need above all patience, wisdom and alertness. Apart from the economic challenge, there are also issues to resolve in the realm of religion.

The challenge here is different from the type faced in the West, where secularism is so endemic that it has sapped religion of its power to arrest moral decay. Neither do we have the problem of some other Muslim countries, where sectarian differences and the use of religion as a political tool have inspired terrorism and caused bloodshed.

We face a religious challenge because we would not exclude religion from our social, political and economic processes. Indeed, we see religion as a force to push us towards economic and social development.

Unfortunately, some of us are impatient. When we speak of Islam as an agent of progress, we are referring to the effort to instil in our society a love for justice and goodness and to allow our spirituality and moral uprightness to shine.

The task is not easy. It requires, above all, sincerity and dedication. But our strategy and approach must be correct. These, in turn, will depend on the depth of our understanding of Islam and the existence of a vibrant culture of learning.

There is no shortage of lessons to be learnt from Islamic history. We know too well the tragic consequences of actions powered by an excess of zeal without the benefit of wisdom.

Muslim intellectuals - both lay and religious - have a crucial role to play in nurturing, among their co-religionists, a deep understanding of Islam and contemporary realities and in promoting religious values through proper means. We must be moderate and pragmatic, which does not mean sacrificing fundamental principles and beliefs in the name of modernity.

Moderation of the approach we take to promote, not sacrifice, the Islamic fundamentals of faith, practice and virtues. The poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal said 60 years ago that there must be equilibrium between the permanent and the changeable in Islam. Confusion has often resulted from a failure to appreciate this equilibrium.

An emphasis on the permanent, stable and eternal to the neglect of the temporal has been a cause of stagnation and regression among Muslims, robbing them of vigour and forcing them to the margins as the rest of the world push forward. But the converse of this would cause a loss of identity and set them adrift.

Muslims must change along with a changing world but not to the extent of undermining their faith in the Oneness of God and their adherence to the rituals and values that define their identity.

The effort to advance general and universal virtues such as justice and compassion and to affirm the dignity of man - which, in the context of current discourse, encompass equitable distribution of wealth and the defence of fundamental rights and freedoms - would require an awareness of contemporary realities, cultural trends, political strengths and advancements in science and technology.

This attitude of moderation in the service of Islam is in fact rooted in a famous Prophetic tradition: "The best way to conduct your affairs is to strike the middle course."

We must bring about an awareness of the importance of knowing our priorities when trying to resolve social issues. The contemporary thinker Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradhawi exhorts Muslims to understand well what he calls *fiqh al-awlawiyyat*, that is, the principle of ordering priorities as an approach in resolving issues and the needs of the Muslim community.

Many social problems still cry out for attention: poverty, unemployment illiteracy, moral decline, inequitable wealth distribution, and ethnic and religious tensions. We cannot hope to solve them all at one go.

Wisdom requires that we not only set an order of priorities but also keep in mind that there are limits to what we can do. To aggravate matters, there are conflicting demands, such as the call to assert an Islamic identity against the need to preserve harmony in a multireligious setting.

These are complex issues that must be handled wisely and with patience. Our tradition abhors haste and enjoins care, prudence and circumspection in the settlement of difficulties. According to the Malay proverb, it is like drawing a strand of hair from a mass of flour without breaking the hair or disturbing the flour.

It is related that the Caliph Umar ibni Abdul Aziz was once chided by his son, Abdul Malik: "O Father! Why have you not reformed society and established justice (that is, to correct the weakness of the Umayyad administration before him). By God, I am not afraid to establish justice even if it means being cast into a boiling cauldron."

Caliph Umar replied, "My son, do not be hasty. Know you not that the Almighty God criticises the drinking of wine twice in the Holy Quran? It is only with the third mention that wine is prohibited. I fear that the people would reject truth and run riot if I am hasty in establishing justice. I have therefore chosen the path of prudence and gradualism."

Muslims in Malaysia have proven to be a society of realists by their moderation, their understanding of contemporary social conditions and their sense of priorities in the implementation of Islam as enjoined by the spirit of the law. We do not consider our efforts to uplift the economic status and the social standing of the community as a mere secular satisfying syariah objectives.

Our work for Islam is not limited to activities where Islamic-sounding terminologies are used. In fact it encompasses all activities that are beneficial to society, and that further the cause of justice and goodness.

According to the *maqasid al-shariah* (expounded by al-Ghazali and expanded by al-Shatibi in his *al-Muwafaqat*), we should give priority to promoting the universal and enduring aspects of Islamic humanitarianism

and compassion. This view stood in stark contrast against that espoused by the school of thought which saw Islam with the eye of the jurist and, moreover, favoured a literalist interpretation of the law.

A number of well-known 20th Century scholars have advanced arguments in favour of the maqasid principle, regarding it as a vehicle through which Islam could answer the challenge of the times. Among them was Imam Abu Zahrah of the al-Azhar University, an influential scholar during his time. In his Usul al-Fiqh, which he wrote five decades ago, he argues for the Five Protections for the public good: religion, life, property, reason and parentage.

On the protection of life, he argues that this includes "protecting the right of authorship, the right to think and have an opinion, the right for shelter and other rights to establish the pillars that are necessary for a life of honour and that would guarantee freedom of movement within the mainstream social dynamics as long as these do not result in the deprivation of the legitimate rights of others.

Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradhawi asserts the necessity for Muslims to resolve pressing social and economic issues including the eradication of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment and the provision of decent housing and other social amenities.

These are conditions which must be satisfied before certain aspects of syariah law could be enforced. Otherwise, the syariah is just an empty shell, a body without a soul.

It is necessary, in our confused world, to reassert the universality of Islam, to show that it is a religion of justice, compassion and tolerance. But this is possible only if our understanding of Islam emphasises the implicit objectives more than the external text. If Muslims were to adopt this attitude, they would certainly contribute to the making of a better world.

Abiding in Islam implies also that we value diligence. Certainly, we encourage the emergence of a middle class and an entrepreneurial community among Bumiputeras. But our real objective is to raise, within the community, a generation of high achievers - diligent men and women who persevere in the face of difficulties and crises.

There are no shortcuts to riches, although it may appear to the uninformed eye that some may have attained to sudden wealth.

As a matter of fact, our tradition has always placed a high value of thoroughness and abhorred superficiality, as illustrated in a pantun:

If you were going to clear the trees
Don't forget to bring also a plough
Do not be like a lotus reed

Its shoot reaches for the sky, its roots does not touch the ground.

We need a business and entrepreneurial class that is genuine and diligent, but also temperate, ethical and upright. They are important not only as enlargers of the communal treasury, but also as a source of pride for their hard work and perseverance. They also are the bulwarks who will protect our integrity in times of adversity and crisis. They can serve as an inspiration, even to those engaged in other vocations, for they are the proof that success comes from honest, honourable and hard work.

At the same time, economic growth cannot occur in isolation from the eradication of poverty, the equitable distribution of wealth, the closing of the rural-urban gap and the provision of quality education, an efficient health service, adequate housing and opportunities to establish small, medium and new industries.

Let us not allow an ambition towards corporate-figure status overpower us to such a degree as to make us forget the larger national aspiration. Rather, we must let that ambition move us along the track of justice and

goodness.

We must groom a secure and robust middle class, represented not only by progressive entrepreneurs, but also creative intellectual and cultural figures.

The dignity and honour of our society depends on more than just money. We will leave behind a crippled society if we do not imbue it with integrity of character. If we were to nurture abiding values, society would be spared the fanatical, power-crazed, and greedy individuals who have crept into our midst to incite hatred with their lies and slanders. These acts of treachery, of course, are absolutely against the teachings of Islam.

O Ye who believe

If a wicked person comes to you with any news

Ascertain the truth

Lest ye harm people unwittingly and afterwards become full of repentance for what ye have done (Al-Hujurat:6)

It seems that we have not learned a lesson from the events that led to the fall of the Malacca Sultanate - the story of Si Kitul and Raja Mandaliar that we relate everytime we convene an assembly such as this. It appears we still regard it as a mere tale from antiquity that has nothing to do with the happenings around us today.

This unwillingness to learn from history is dangerous. It lulls us into complacency. It leaves us rocking in a cradle of dreams, as if what we enjoy today will endure forever. We become arrogant, believing that we are invincible to any threat, internal or external. The truth is that the gains that we have acquired can vanish in an instant if we are not careful.

We can move forward with confidence and fortitude. Being careful does not mean giving up the will to move forward, but we must take along a clear vision and a resilience against all manner of challenges and obstructions. Nevertheless, if we do not watch our steps, we could well fall into a predicament from which it would be difficult to get out.

As a political party, Umno is responsible for protecting the integrity not only of its leadership, but also its membership and indeed the entire nation. Hence, every move it makes must be for the good of the Malaysian society, which expects nothing less.

Umno is no longer just a party among many competing to determine the direction the nation should take. It is, on the contrary, the major partner in the country's administration. The party therefore has to shoulder the bigger share of the burden of leadership.

The Malaysian people as a whole have placed their trust in Umno. In this era of globalisation, we have to attend not only to internal issues but beyond that to ensure for ourselves a respectable position among the community of nations.

Globalisation also means that we live in a veritable glass house. The entire world can see what goes on in our home. Not so long ago, we used to complain about the world's indifference to us. We raved and ranted for attention, but no one would listen. Today, every single move we make is observed and commented upon. Every little action is noted and judged. We need to watch ourselves, lest we are seen as a party given to hysterics, or likened to the man in the proverb who notices the germ across the river but is oblivious to the rotting carcass of the elephant before him.

Globalisation also demands that we pay attention to global humanitarian issues. We must be grateful for being blessed not only with a wealth of resources, but also a stable and peaceful political climate that has helped to spur our economic and social growth. Many nations do not enjoy these advantages.

No doubt, credit is due also to the diligence of Malaysians. Our success is not a true miracle; it is not something given to use by a jinn in a magic lamp. Nevertheless, we cannot deny our good luck and we must give thanks to God.

To benefit from the experiences of our neighbours, we can see how calamities can easily befall an entire people. Nations which 50 or 30 years ago stood ahead of everyone else are not necessarily among the foremost today.

We must reject the arrogance that is often mistaken for strength. Instead, it is humility and vigilance that are the true marks of excellence. This is the strength that comes from knowledge and certitude; the truly strong are those who have conquered themselves and know their proper place. What is true of an individual is true also of a nation, for a nation, too, can forget its place and be forgotten by its leaders.

We must stand shoulder to shoulder in support of our beloved leader, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and renew our faith in the dynamism and resilience of our economy. Let us not allow anyone to drive a wedge in our ranks and split our leadership.

We must reinforce our determination and solidarity and lend our full support to the leadership as it meets a fierce economic challenge. This is the time to strengthen our unity. Let us not take our comforts for granted and get hysterical when our provisions are diminished. Our fighting spirit is being tested.

Herein lies the role of the Youth and Wanita movements. Both wings have always taken the front line in the party's struggles and this includes defending it against internal and external threats. As such, both must remain united and invincible.

If our unity is secure, we will have the strength to weather all storms that may blow our way and remain true to the spirit of the party and be equal to the task the nation demands of us. Verily we are being put to the test of character, through prosperity as well as adversity, so as to determine who among us are truly striving in the path of goodness, who indeed are the most persevering.

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