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Mobilise the people to aim for `zero corruption'

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THE recently concluded national congress on Vision 2020 was in many respects a remarkable event. Sceptics who thought the congress would merely echo the fine sentiments embodied in 2020 were proven wrong.

Considering that a majority of the participants were from the middle and upper echelons of society, or what would be ordinarily described as "The Establishment", it was significant that there was a perceptible degree of critical reflection on each of the nine challenges to Vision 2020.

Participants, for instance, felt that in order to achieve the goal of a Bangsa Malaysia, various economic, political and social measures will have to be taken to reduce ethnic dichotomisation in the public life of the nation.

It was also argued that the growth of "a mature democratic society" would demand greater legitimacy for and accommodation of diverse points of view.

A moral and ethical society would not be possible without far-reaching reforms aimed at enhancing public accountability and transparency.

The congress was also of the opinion that one of the prerequisites for scientific innovation and creativity was a fundamental reorientation of the education system.

It was not just in the type of ideas espoused that the congress made its mark. The congress was a genuinely multi-ethnic meeting - which is rare these days - where ethnic concerns were expressed without resulting in ethnic fissures.

Women were vocal participants providing some of the more insightful comments on the gap between ideals and realities in Malaysian society. The organisers made a special attempt to include young people, a number of whom spoke intelligently and knowledgeably about the future of the nation.

A handful of Federal Ministers and Deputy Ministers, Menteri Besar, Chief Ministers and senior civil servants stayed right through the two-day proceedings which again was a unique feature of the congress.

If the congress took on a certain tone and tenor, it was partly because of the holistic approach to Vision 2020 lucidly articulated in the keynote address of the Prime Minister. While emphasising that, "we must proceed and not falter over our economic agenda", Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad also stressed the importance of taking "giant steps forward on our social agenda".

As he put it, "but at this particular moment in time, what seems particularly pressing is the need to ensure the correct balance between material and spiritual development... We do not want to be a wasteful consumer society where unbridled materialism runs riot."

In his dialogue with the participants (which has become one of his most effective modes of communication with the intelligentsia) at the end of the congress, Dr Mahathir reiterated the need for a strong sense of shame in both the individual and collective consciousness as a vital ingredient in the creation of a truly moral society.

Now that the congress is over, the Prime Minister's concerns and the participants' ideas should be translated into action programmes.

It is true that some of the proposals from the congress may be less feasible than others. Yet other suggestions will take a while longer to implement. But there will also be ideas that can be transformed into laws and policies without much delay.

There is no reason why radio and television stations should not highlight shared ethical values in forums, talk shows and even dramas as a way of fostering unity among the different ethnic communities.

Those laws that tend to inhibit popular participation in the political process should be identified and either abrogated or modified.

Similarly, the authorities should begin formulating more effective laws to combat corruption, such as the outright confiscation of ill-gotten gains of a person convicted of the crime. The time has also come for the authorities to take steps towards establishing a constitutionally protected Anti-Corruption Agency independent of the Executive.

Through laws, policies and programmes, moral values and ideals will acquire the power and potency that they apparently lack at the moment.

Advising leaders to be ethical or pleading with the populace to be moral is not enough. Moral suasion alone, especially if it is at the level of rhetoric, has seldom succeeded in inducing individuals to abandon their corrupt ways. This is why good moral values and ideals will have to be institutionalised to enhance their impact and their effectiveness.

In fact, the institutionalisation of values - such as honesty and integrity - to check corruption began in the early years of Merdeka with the establishment of the ACA.

We must now accelerate the process in earnest. This is the time to do it. The economy is still performing reasonably well. There is relative political stability. There is a large measure of ethnic tolerance. Umno and the Barisan Nasional have never been more secure. Dr Mahathir is at the pinnacle of his popularity.

If we do not act now, we may never get the opportunity again.

In this regard, shouldn't we, as the congress recommended, mobilise the people against corruption by aiming for "zero corruption"?

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