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Disaffection of people should not be ignored

Paddy Bowie

IN the end, Malaysia acquitted itself superbly well at Sukom. We can be justifiably proud. The country was nevertheless cheated, to a degree, of the publicity it deserved. Our political antics swamped the media and crowded off the international pages some of the space our sporting prowess had earned. Trust the Press to prefer an unlawful assembly and a street brawl to the healthy and legitimate contests taking place in the arena.

When a nation is on test whether the challenge is economic or sporting - the only true rallying point is behind the country. Crowds need not be hostile. Take the stadium at Sukom. As the cheers reverberated and as they shouted "Malaysia Boleh", it felt good to be Malaysian. If you want a show of strength, this is the right kind. "National unity" should be the chant. We need to build national resolve not divide the nation. To support not obstruct.

I come now to my strongest condemnation. I was appalled to see women and children brought into the fray. It is not the children's fight. We are supposed to protect them. Is it safe to put them literally in the frontline - almost like human shields? Yet Malaysians love children. And what do you think the children themselves made of it all?

Don't we need to protect them from the ugly side of life? Childhood is meant to be a time of innocence. Do we really want to bring them into an atmosphere of adult anger and rage, especially the disturbing spectacle of human hatred instead of love? They are too young to be so exposed and will learn soon enough when they grow up. We have just celebrated World Children's Day with the intent to cherish our young. Are we hypocrites? They should be at the beach on Sunday, at the zoo or the cinema. Or McDonald's. I didn't see Ronald on the CNBC clips, only human nature in a far less appealing guise, emitting fury not laughter.

The children of broken homes are often scarred for life. What about the children of a broken nation? What sort of example are we setting for them? What values are we giving them? Violence is addictive, It can be projected as exciting, glamorous even. These children could grow up with an appetite for it.

I know these are intended as peaceful demonstrations but can you guarantee they stay that way? Don't use your children. Please. They could even have been decoys to suggest this was a shopping crowd.

How serious then are these demonstrations and how serious is their cause? It is easy, of course, to dismiss them as rabble especially given these earlier examples of rabble rousing. And there will always be a minority who go along just for the fun. A strange idea of fun! But this is the Hyde Park Corner syndrome where hundreds gather on Sunday morning in London to hear the fiery orators at the world's best-known soapbox. But assuredly, they do not subscribe to the views expressed. In fact, by the time they are back home sitting down to the ritual Sunday lunch they have forgotten them. We do not expect commitment nor lasting loyalty to the demonstrations from the merely curious. The opportunists are different - they are always in search of trouble wherever they can find it or make it.

We should be concerned, however, with those who were there at Dataran Merdeka in good faith, who assembled at the dictates of their consciences. Reformasi has turned into a level of grievance stronger and much more widespread than we suspected existed, and which must be taken seriously.

A cry for Reformasi is most likely to strike a chord with anyone under 25, so the younger generation predominates. It probably makes them feel noble. We've all been there in our time. We've all been rebels and hotheads in our (for me, distant) youth. We remember when our ideals too were pristine fresh. It is probably forgotten that Dr Mahathir in his time was dubbed "the Redeemer", even branded an "ultra" because he was a liberal idealist par excellence. This doesn't quite square with those taunts of authoritarianism or that jaundiced view of some power-crazed dictator we keep hearing about in global circles. But we in Malaysia know he has been true to his ideals and unlike most of us, has actually realised many of the early aspirations that fired his youthful passion. Without need of a single demonstration, let it be said.

As the cry goes up for change, we might reflect that the single most creative and courageous undertaking this country has ever known is the widesweeping reform we call the New Economic Policy or NEP that has created a modern middle-class out of the sons of padi farmers. Unless, of course, you discount the achievement of independence. Again, Dr Mahathir was part of that great liberating struggle of the Merdeka generation, and the subsequent social reform. He has effected more change in this country than any other single individual.

Our young friends are campaigning for an even better Malaysia in the coming millennium. Is it not called Vision 2020? We already have a bold and well-conceived plan for strategic change of which they will be the inheritors.

But after the crowds have all dispersed, we are left with something we should not ignore, the disaffection that proved strong enough to achieve this convergence of such disparate groups - from youth to intellectuals to dissidents, generally. Our society is stressed. Perhaps there is a need to re-examine those institutions that have been called in question. But the process must be judicious, rational and constructive, not emotional and destructive.

A final footnote. We are expecting another lot of important visitors thismonth. The first Apec meeting to be hosted in Malaysia is another milestone in the country's growing stature in international affairs, despite our media enemies.

Second chances don't come all that often. But here we have another opportunity to showcase our beautiful country, our commitment to that country and its leadership. To showcase Malaysians at their best - in their true persona, warm, hospitable, welcoming and friendly. We are a deeply religious country. We are a multi-racial people who live peacefully side by side. We are a stable country. An unruly mob does not reflect either our social or our religious ethos. I hope when our visitors come, we will remember our traditions of courtesy and our good manners.

It is a fervent wish.

To reverse the coin and end on a note of warning: we need to decide our priorities. If Malaysians choose to be obstructive - if they go on impeding the Government in its all-demanding task of charting economic recovery, for the benefit of everyone - then all we will have to showcase is a bankrupt Malaysia.

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