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Put interest of country above all else

Paddy Bowie

THESE are sad times for all Malaysians. On top of our economic woes, we now have a political crisis on our hands. We have always prized our stability, the one clear advantage we have had over others in the region. Why do we put it at risk? Most of us believed in the near-legendary partnership that teamed Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the nationalist visionary and architect of the country's wealth, with the philosopher-princeling, a man of great charm and a gifted orator, the chosen successor to lead Malaysia in the crucial run-up to 2020. Our "father-and-son" combination in politics - and implicitly, an orderly succession in the Umno tradition.

To say that we were stunned by the abrupt end to that partnership is an understatement. The princeling's journey from high office to a Sungai Buloh cell was relatively short, certainly dramatic, and by unacceptable form of protest. I say this because taking to the streets is not the Malaysian way. We consider ourselves civilised. This is uncivilised behaviour.

The concern that is uppermost therefore is for the real victim in this whole sorry business - Malaysia: its traditions, its institutions, and above all its good name. The country should be above any one individual.

What is happening? At the end of the day, what we all seek is simply truth and justice. We want to believe that the standards of decency and fairness we equate with being Malaysian will prevail now.

Suddenly in this context, we are surrounded by the species known as barrack room lawyers. Me, I prefer the real thing. I have this strange preference for leaving it to the professionals, whether they're the ones who paint your house, tend to your health, or who dispense justice.

The rights and wrongs of the case we are now not supposed to discuss will be decided in a court of law, without fear or favour, by those better qualified than we to judge. The legal system is sacrosanct, provided, like me, you believe in the rule of law.

Of course we can expect the doubting Thomases to arrive by the planeload - self-appointed guardians of fair play, who will turn the whole thing into a media circus. All the more reason for Malaysians to keep faith with our laws and our Constitution, our legal and other institutions.

I cannot comment on matters that are subjudice. But I, as a citizen, wish to register my complaints and my unease with the way the present drama is unfolding. It is all too easy to blame our troubles and our loss of credibility on a wicked foreign Press. But in some ways, we have only ourselves to blame. We seem to be behaving badly under stress. Some of us.

Is this the time for political protests when we should be concentrating on financial recovery? As it is, our political problems are already obstructing our economic efforts. Any threat of civil disorder compounds the crisis by undermining that stability, which is the ace in our pack in attracting foreign investors. We are talking of an image crisis as damaging in its own way as the financial variety.

I am sure some of the demonstrators believe they have just cause. But is this the way to go about things? For make no mistake about it, these demonstrations are unlawful assemblies - and a threat to public peace and security. We have well-established Constitutional rights and fully democratic electoral processes to protect our citizens. The opportunity to express the people's ultimate political power and choice is via the ballot

boxes and not via Merdeka Square.

The alternative is mob rule. Demonstrations are a potentially dangerous and irresponsible path to take. They are also against our culture. Malaysians are fundamentally decent, polite, law-abiding, tolerant people. They value peace. but now they are acting out of character and flirting with violence. How "passive" can resistance be when it only takes one hot head, one fanatic, to get out of hand. Before you know it, mob hysteria takes over.

We should consider carefully the escalation factor. So far the most common epithet used to describe our demonstrations has been "unruly". Can anyone guarantee it won't turn into a "riot"?. Even as I write this, the front page of the Sunday Star shows an enraged crowd beating up a lone and helpless policeman. They had come armed with stones and iron rods. They also brought inflammatory pamphlets and inflammatory materials. There were women and children present.

Even more sinister, the pamphlets declared their intent of violence and their commitment to future violence. With this the nature of the protests has changed - we have entered a new and more menacing phase. This is the road to Indonesia.

The last time I saw people take to the streets in Kuala Lumpur was in 1969. Deaths resulted. I thought we had learned a salutary lesson. When are we going to come to our senses?

Instead I hear, with grave misgivings, the invective and the vile imprecations hurled by the crowd. Working up people's emotions is a dangerous game. Feed their anger and it soon turns to rage - notoriously "blind" rage. One placard I saw was its own condemnation: "Death to Mahathir" it proclaimed. This is the behaviour of the most vile and dangerous mob of all, a lynch mob. It belongs more to the Ku Klux Klan than to civilised people. In this country, alleged offenders are given a fair trial.

Timing is not only of the essence, it can be malevolent. The biggest demonstration of all coincided with the closing of the Commonwealth Games - striking at Malaysia at its most vulnerable, when we were in the world's spotlight, with national pride at stake. Were those supposed champions of fair play really out to sabotage Sukom that so many had worked so hard to make a success? If so, I have no hesitation in calling it both selfish and disloyal.

A crowd of 35,000 had gathered in the vicinity of Dataran Merdeka. I don't know who was counting - participation was not by toll gate nor ticket. CNN reported 100,000 - that sounds better.

We all knew that on that day, a visiting Head of State would be attending church service nearby. The implied threat of public order was enough to render both host and visitors extremely nervous. Malaysia has always treated its guests with the utmost courtesy and respect.

To say nothing of the bad impression made on the overseas visitors we had striven to attract here. Of course the foreign Press had a field day. Here in droves to cover the Games, they were easily diverted by the excitement across town and made the most of the sensational photos that fell into their laps. The cheers we had the right to expect on CNN turned to jeers. The same media, let it be noted, had been allowed to come and go freely, interviewing all and sundry. It's called the freedom of the Press.

The political unrest was an unwelcome distraction when we had other and better things to do.

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\* Part Two tomorrow.

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