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Time we listened to the silent majority

Rose Ismail

YOU may have seen the huge advertisement on page 34 of the New Straits Times Business section yesterday..

It said: "We confess, we are not interested in politics but we are Malaysians and we are proud of it."

And, below that, names of hundreds of Malaysians who called a hotline number to register their obvious disgust with US Vice-President Al Gore at a dinner on Monday.

What does this say? Is the silent majority finally speaking up? Does it take a foreigner to push us to make a stand about our country?

In a way, we should thank the Vice-President. His patronising words were painful but it forced us to take a closer look at ourselves.

And this is important because, aside from being angry with him and throwing verbal bricks at the American Government for their disdainful attitude towards us, we must now look into the mirror and decide whether we are indeed happy with the reflection we see.

This requires enormous courage. More courage, I think, than running mindlessly out into the street to burn a motorbike or to beat up someone whom you think is the cause of all your miseries.

While lashing out may be empowering, it may just lead to more violence and instability. Then what?

Certainly, the ability to recognise both the strengths and weaknesses of this nation and still feel energetic enough to want to make things better - is what differentiates the weak from the brave.

Take Joyce, whom I met at breakfast yesterday. Eight years ago, she was planning to emigrate to Australia but when she heard both the Prime Minister and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim speak at a conference in Hong Kong, she felt so immensely proud of them and of her country.

"What am I doing?" she asked herself, as she tore up the immigration papers. "I belong here. This is my country."

There are so many like Joyce out there. And, as the advertisement shows, so many who are not particularly interested in politics but who want democratic spaces to widen, more voices to be heard and different and dissenting views to be respected in this country.

But because they won't go out into the streets and shout slogans, their needs are pushed aside and drowned by the clamour made by the demonstrators.

This is terribly unfair.

Unfair to the large majority who also want change.

It may also be unfair to the Reformasi group because when the sloganeering and shouting are accompanied by violence, it forces people to look for the hidden motives of those demanding change.

People like Joyce aren't particularly happy with everything taking place in the country today but her concerns, I feel, are just as valid (if not more) as those who rant and rave in the streets week after week.

Perhaps we should listen to people like Joyce. Listen to the silence because this is where the support is. This is where you'll find people who, when it comes to the crunch, will pick up the metaphorical pick-axe, to defend their country.

The political analysts who support Anwar were quoted in foreign papers as saying that "Gore might have played into the hands of Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad who has used anti-Western jeremiads... as a means to

galvanise his mostly rural supporters."

I would say this is half-right. Gore did play into the hands of some. But the Prime Minister has had nothing to do with it. Rather, it is the people, ordinary people who have been galvanised into action: they are finally saying something about the blatant interference by foreigners as well as their loyalty to this land.

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