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Tolerance is our hallmark

THE world's great creeds promote religious tolerance. Down the centuries, wise leaders have shown by precept and example the importance of respect for another's beliefs. Malaysian leader Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has never wavered in his stand on this matter. He has constantly reminded Malaysians of the crucial need to eschew extremism. Moderation, he reiterates, is the key.

In Sabah on Friday, religious leaders expressed their appreciation of the Prime Minister's untiring efforts in fostering inter-religious understanding in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. After a meeting with Dr Mahathir, the leaders told the media that they supported his call to the various religious organisations to understand and respect one another's faith. They shared his vision of a united and harmonious Malaysian nation that would be a shining beacon to the rest of the world. They responded wholeheartedly, too, to his reminder that they be moderate in propagating their creeds to ensure continued religious tolerance. The leaders, including community heads, pledged to work together, irrespective of religion, race, or any other ethnic difference, for the good of Sabah in particular, and Malaysia in general.

A look at history, both ancient and modern, will awaken us to the dire consequences of religious intolerance. Malaysia has a proud history of overall racial and religious harmony. The times when this was severely tested have served only to deepen Malaysians' resolve to further strengthen the inter-ethnic ties. In these trying times, it is heartening to see the great majority of Malaysians closing ranks to help the country overcome the toughest economic challenge since independence. In the face of foreign media onslaught against the country's political and economic policies, the people have rallied behind the Government.

The recent nationwide groundswell against United States Vice-President Al Gore's uncalled-for remarks against Malaysia while on Malaysian soil is clear testimony to the people's solidarity. If the intention was to destabilise Malaysia, it has backfired. Malaysians have shown in no uncertain terms that whatever their surface differences, the overriding considerations are the dignity and sovereignty of their country. We will brook no trespass on our right to decide our own destiny. The sheer audacity of the remarks has incensed the normally unruffled Malaysians into unprecedented ire. The selfsame Western media which continues to paint a distorted Malaysia in other respects, is now admitting that Gore's statement has galvanised Malaysians into solid support for their leader.

Such show of solidarity is only possible when people of different communities, cultures and creeds have grown together through years of deep-rooted tolerance. Dr Mahathir, matching action to words, has never hesitated to nip in the bud anything that could upset this harmonious environment which has enabled the nation to grow from strength to strength. As a seasoned statesman, he is very much aware that the slightest ripple on the calm surface can grow into a maelstrom with racial and religious ramifications. The Government's swift action in settling the religious misunderstanding in Penang many months ago is a case in point. Needless to say, preserving the country's most treasured gifts of peace and stability is not the task of the Government alone but that of every Malaysian. Grassroots and community leaders, the nation's unsung heroes, have quietly been helping to resolve many a sensitive issue.

During his Sabah visit, Dr Mahathir exhorted the people to work together to strengthen feelings of Malaysian oneness. If the seeds of division are allowed to germinate, "everything that has been painstakingly built would crumble into dust". Unity is vital in maintaining a peaceful, progressive and prosperous country. Only in this way can we ensure that the next generation will inherit a Malaysia that can hold its own in all aspects of human endeavour.

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