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We have to avoid falling, divided, into stagnation, anger and hate

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THERE is nothing like a common enemy to bind people together.

To many, pro-reformasi demonstrators are viewed as threats to the peace of the nation, with Indonesia a very frightening example of what can happen if law and order cannot contain mass anger and frustration.

To the pro-reformasi group, the perceived autocracy of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a threat to the powers and rights of the general population to determine their collective future.

To Dr Mahathir and the Government, the world is rife with threats, ranging from the more obvious economic troubles with the global financial crisis and physical dangers like Indonesia, with its hungry and increasingly violent masses, power struggles within the military, and memories of Konfrontasi not so long ago; to the less tangible problems like the new radical image of Malaysia as seen through the eyes of the foreign media, which affect trade, investments and tourism; and to even more insidious threats from "unknown elements" who would like to restrain Malaysia's growing influence on the world stage.

To the previously silent majority; the battle of wills between the Prime Minister and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, and scores of friends and relatives calling from all over the world to find out how it is that our peaceful and prosperous tropical paradise had dissolved in a flash into so-called riots and mayhem (thanks to clever camerawork by CNN); Al Gore was the last straw.

There is no denying the anger and fear associated with such blatant foreign interference, and the solidarity of the Malaysian people in defending our right to determine our leadership by popular vote.

But I worry that we are still divided. At a time when we must channel considerable energy into rebuilding our foothold in economic terms, we have been asked, very loudly, by our brethren in the reformasi movement to consider a change in leadership, to rid ourselves of corruption and an unfair accumulation of wealth by a few. Unfortunately, we have not been presented with a coherent and logical plan as to how this is to be achieved. Will corruption go away if Dr Mahathir steps down?

The emotions which are the driving force behind the reformasi movement are very real, and, although we may not agree with the way these emotions are being expressed, they are shared by a lot of people, I included. They represent a demand for greater accountability by the Government which is entrusted with our future and that of our children.

We hope, for instance, that entities such as Danaharta will continue to be transparent in carrying out their appointed tasks, and serve as an example to other government-backed organisations.

Unless these fears are assuaged, the Government remains vulnerable to a corrosion in support and influence, particularly at the next general election.

Having said that, I would also hesitate to say that we have a viable alternative in the form of our Opposition leaders, who have adopted the reformasi movement.

Emotions are one thing, but in determining the fate of our nation, we must make our choices based on reason, and would appreciate clear policies rather than rhetoric.

We are not perfect. We do not have complete freedom to say what we think, or have access to complete disclosure about the way the country is

run, but we have more political opposition than say, Singapore.

We have access, albeit a limited one, to alternative views in print, mostly in the vernacular languages.

We have the right to choose our leaders, via elections, without the looming presence of the military.

We have a long way to go in championing women's rights, but at the same time, we have more women leaders in business and politics than most of our neighbours.

Before the economic crisis, we had probably the highest proportion of students in the region relative to population going abroad to study, to provide the impetus for the social infrastructure needed to take advantage of the nation's well-developed physical infrastructure to spearhead our future growth.

Indeed, there is no question that credit should go to the Government under the leadership of Dr Mahathir for the progress we achieved in so short a time. This is why a great deal of faith is vested in the present Government to get the economy back on track.

The different components of our society, as defined by race, religion or economic background have so far co-existed peacefully, albeit with audible but not too outspoken rumbles on each side about how much the others have relative to their own respective pots of opportunities.

We have recently developed a new, if fragile, confidence in ourselves in raising our standards of excellence to levels hitherto achieved by developed nations, as represented by the LRT System, Measat, the 16th Commonwealth Games, and producing aeroplanes for export.

We have much to be proud of in Malaysia, and much to lose if we fall, divided, into stagnation, anger and hate.

We are not starving, or being bombed, and people don't disappear in the night, never to be seen again. We are not defined by the few who have been captured on film fighting on the streets. We cannot and should not be equated with the Phillipines under Marcos or the Indonesia under Suharto. Although we cannot control how the foreign media portrays us today, we can prove them wrong; and if we persist, the truth will prevail.

Whether we agree with them or not, the pro-reformasi movement has opened up healthy debate for a reassessment of who we are, how we live and where we are going..

Our maturity as a free country must manifest itself with logic and reason and positive action. In gearing up for the upcoming general election, both the Government and the Opposition have the opportunity to present their detailed blueprints as to how they are going to take care of our collective well-being.

In as much as the Government should be vigilant about money politics, the Opposition too should come clean as to their sources of funding, to give us assurance that they are not unduly influenced by external parties. It is my hope that they will both appeal to us with some measure of dignity and respect for our thinking abilities.

In the meantime, we have an economy to rebuild.

For anyone who wants to know, I am not aligned with a particular political movement, or non-governmental organisation.

I do not work for the Government, and do not represent my employer. I do not have friends or family in high places who will bail me out if someone takes offence to what I have to say. These are my observations as a citizen of this country.