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Eschew racial politics

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ON April 4, the National Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Nasional), the country's newest party, was launched with fanfare at a five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur.

Its leaders claim it is a multiracial party but stress that Malays, who comprise about 57 per cent of the population, will hold political dominance.

"The essence of Keadilan is Melayu and Malay leadership" stated the party's Question & Answer pamphlet. Which must mean that the power of forming a new government, if it ever comes to power, will still be in the hands of one race, as opposed to power-sharing for all Malaysians, by all Malaysians. Given that understanding in terms of political ideological, there is not much difference between all the political parties in Malaysia. From the 1960s, Malaysians are still organised politically along racial lines.

But few political parties have even implied they had a vendetta against any one politician. Said Datuk Sharir Samad, Johor Baru Umno division chief, in a recent report about Keadilan. "Their focus is anti-Mahathir. What happens when (Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) is no more?," adding that time dulls anger.

Keadilan stated at its launch that it is for justice and reformation. Hence the question: justice for whom exactly and reformation of what - Umno? Doing away with colonial laws like the Internal Security Act and the Official Secrets Act? A citizen's right to discredit without fear of any reprisals? Will Keadilan have the courage to offer such promises.. and keep them?

If only Malaysians were so fortunate. But since racial support is so important to keep a political party in power in Malaysia and since communal politics seems so entrenched in the system of governance of this country, it stands to reason that if a new political coalition takes over, the old guard will be thrown in jail, associates thrown out of their offices and jobs, and corporations given to new "friends".

Whither then the "Bangsa Malaysis" put forth by Dr Mahathir in a working paper. "Malaysia: The Way Forward (Vision 2020)" on Feb 28, 1991.

Gerakan vice-president Dr Goh Cheng Teik had suggested in a 1994 book, Beyond Communal Politics, that political parties open their doors to Malaysians from other races. Umno has in fact opened membership to Thais in Kedah and the Kadazans in Sabah, while a Malaysian of however little Chinese ancestry is allowed to join the MCA.

Goh suggested that all remaining barriers to political party membership be removed. Amending the party constitution should not stand in the way towards achieving a political level playing field.

However, if that is a problem, Goh had also suggested a federal law be enacted to require all political parties to open their doors to all citizens, regardless of race. Such a law would require every elected representative to be accountable directly to his or her constituents, to act as Malaysian politicians. Merit would be the general yardstick for political survival and not racial rhetoric.

This move was not favoured then.

The persistence of communal politics today may be one reason why many Malaysians either have yet to register as voters, do not exercise their right to vote, or believe gerrymandering is so powerful a tool as to

ensure a win for one political party, usual in power, over another, the latter usually in the Opposition. By the way, in most country constitutions, the Election Commission has the leeway to redraw electoral boundaries to accommodate a larger voter base, among other factors.

With communal politics, the politicians of Malaysia today must win the vote from within and without.

Take Anwar Ibrahim, for example. In the 1993 Umno election, he launched the phrase "Melayu Baru" to counter Ghafar Baba's "Melayu Kampung" call.

Anwar, then the Education Minister, did not at any time change it to "Malaysia Baru" for it was a Umno party poll and he had to win the votes from within the party. So he played to the gallery.

Is communal politics then an obstacle towards achieving a "Bangsa Malaysia"? Malaysia and her people have overcome many obstacles after independence in 1957. Despite Britain's doubts that this union of different races would never work, it did.

Malaysia has seen no coup d'etats by the military or other quarters unlike in Thailand and the Philippines. Until September last year, Malaysians have eschewed violence as a way of redressing perceived injustices. Even then, a few roads in the federal capital filled by riled-up students, urbanites and typical curious bystanders do not make for the kind of chaos as in, say, the Rodney King issue in Los Angeles.

Despite the Communist guerilla war, the Konfrantasi started by Suharto, the 1969 riots and Operation Lalang, general elections were held in `59, `64, `69, `74, `78, `82, `86, `90, `95 and by 2000.

Malaysia has enjoyed political stability despite loose coalitions over the years, like Semangat 46 (led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah which failed in the 1990 polls) and now Keadilan. Most Malaysians and almost all those in their 20s have been blessed with peace and political stability for so long that the only knowledge of the horrors and tragedy and heartbreak that civil war can bring comes from the media or through the electronic medium.

Undeniably, the New Economic Policy/New Development Policy has ensured inter-racial stability by redressing the identification of economic activities and functions with race and reducing absolute poverty in rural areas. Modernisation of the rural areas by building better infrastructure raised the standard and quality of living of most rural folk to those comparable with urban residents.

This may seem inconsequential to the urbanite who enjoys satellite television and access to foreign media and the Internet in 1999, and inconceivable to the well-travelled Armani-suited upper echelon.

Diversifying the economy with emphasis on manufacturing, construction, export-oriented sectors, banking, and financial services helped increase the slices of the economic pie. These efforts saw the rise of Malay businessmen and tycoons, and a growing middle-class that cut across racial lines.

Education is also a good unifying measure. A common national language, taught in government-aided schools and universities with a common syllabus and common textbooks, has built this force of a younger generation educated at home that speaks in Bahasa Malaysia first.

And while enjoying the thrill of Ferragamo shoes and the cineplex, there is also the freedom to worship with temples, mosques, churches, suraus, community halls, being built with government aid and funds.

Despite these unifying factors, where is the sense of nationhood, of sharing a common destiny? These are prerequisites in forming a Bangsa Malaysia as stated in Vision 2020.

Racialism is tenacious and so is communal politics which uses the race issue to win the vote. Keadilan, or any other party that offers a platform

of racial political dominance, is not offering any new bridge to bring about a common political consciousness among the electorate.

Malaysians are polite and courteous to each other and very accommodating to foreigners, but does ethnicity reign deep down?

Could this be another Yugolsavia, for example. Before 1990 and under Marshall Josip Tito, Yugoslavia was praised by many world leaders. It was progressing dynamically. And the common folk of the world did not know of these factions called Serbs or Bosnians. But with Tito's death on 1980, Yugoslavia disintegrated into waring republics. Bosnians, Croats, Serbians, Macedonians, Kosovars were obviously only Yugoslavians superficially.

The efforts of Malaysia and her people to become a developed nation and achieve Vision 2020 draw much international attention because the nation has been and still is a success story. The process of change cannot be rushed and the Prime Minister set no time-frame when he spoke about a Bangsa Malaysia and Vision 2020 in February 1991.

But perhaps communal politics should be eschewed to pave the way for a Bangsa Malaysia?

(END)