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A true Malaysian race and the issue of a non-Malay PM

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TWO issues have generated considerable public interest and evoked various responses. One is the statement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad after the opening of the MCA general assembly on the possibility of a non-Malay becoming Prime Minister in the future when "the time is right".

The second is the Government's decision to set aside protocol at functions to allow interaction between the rakyat and their leaders.

As a former elected representative and now a social commentator I would like to offer my views.

It was a pleasant surprise to see the Prime Minister raising the issue. Certainly no other Umno leader would have ventured to bring up the subject and take the "risk".

Judging by the response from Umno Youth and other Umno leaders, it is obvious that the issue of a non-Malay becoming a Prime Minister is not one which can be easily resolved.

According to Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, the Youth movement would not accept a non-Malay Prime Minister for the time being.

He said although it was a national aspiration to create a Malaysian race without having to consider one's ethnic background, a non-Malay Prime Minister would not fit into the country's political scenario.

Hishammuddin's response is understandable. It is also equally understandable for non-Malay political leaders in the Barisan Nasional to have hailed the Prime Minister's statement as a truly Malaysian concept.

Irrespective of whatever is the Prime Minister's true motive when the issue of a non-Malay becoming a PM in the future was brought up, the key words here are really "when the time is right" and "the person concerned is accepted by all the ethnic groups in the country".

While it is true that there is nothing in our Federal Constitution to bar a non-Malay from becoming a Prime Minister in our multi-racial nation, the non-constitutional factors and the political realities are equally important.

There is the question of religion and culture, and whether non-Malay MPs will make up the majority in the Dewan Rakyat.

There is also the question of delineation of electoral constituencies and whether it favours the election of non-Malay elected representatives.

When Dr Mahathir brought up the subject, my instant reaction was that the Umno president was sending a very clear signal to the Malays and in particular to the Umno members, that they will have to face the possibility of having a non-Malay PM if the Malays continue to be divided. I am sure many others feel the same. As far as I am concerned, much as I am aware of what is in the statute book, I certainly do not see the likelihood of it happening in the foreseeable future.

To me it appears more logical to start off with a non-Malay as a Deputy Prime Minister and if this is not possible, how remote it is to talk of a PM's post. The other more crucial issue is why talk about who should be Prime Minister when the reality is that not all of us see ourselves as Malaysians.

So long as there are those who still think and act as Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazandusun, Ibans etc instead of Malaysians, the primary challenge as contained in Vision 2020 to create a Malaysian race is all the more remote.

To me the biggest challenge facing the nation in the new millennium is how to go about creating a "Malaysian race" and work towards the day when we no longer have ethnically based societies and organisations including political parties.

The move to do away with protocol at all government functions to enable the rakyat to foster closeness with their leaders and government officials is certainly a step in the right direction.

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