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A time for forgiveness

THE month of Syawal marks the victory of Muslims in abstaining from the desires and temptations of their lower self (nafs) while observing the fast during the month of Ramadan. Abstinence or fasting is not peculiar to Islam. Sages of every religion have praised it as the best means of purification and of curbing the force of the lower self.

But as reminded by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his Hari Raya Aidilfitri message, the celebration of this victory should be moderate, without losing sight of the virtues which we have inculcated during the month-long fasting, patience (sabr') and gratitude (syukr). These virtues, which are also enjoined by other faiths, should be observed in our national life. These traits will determine the success of the nation as it continues its journey in the new millennium.

In times of national trials, the people's patience and steadfastness allowed the country to ride through them without bloody riots and communal clashes. Unlike in some other countries where fear turned into hate. Patience can translate into many things - the faith of the people in the Government's action to defend the country's sovereignty and nurse the ailing economy to health following the financial turbulence two years ago, the courage of the people to abide by the Government's policies in the face of worldwide condemnation and its resilience in not allowing crises to tear asunder their unity and social harmony. More important, the patience of charting our own destiny without yielding to fear or doubt.

Challenges call for clear heads and strong hearts. Regardless of the crisis, we must turn away from extremism in all its forms, from fealty to foreign masters in their guises be it in the oppressive structural adjustment programme of the International Monetary Fund or neo-liberal economic agenda and from self-deception, be it in believing that the nation's struggle is over or in being complacent. Without patience, our unity will be sapped and our strength destroyed. For, as said in Al-Baqarah:155, "God subject you to trials in fear, hunger and loss in property..." not to crush us but to test our patience, re-affirm our faith and strengthen our convictions.

Only when we have been in the deepest valley can we ever know how magnificent it is to be on the highest mountain. Counting our blessings or being grateful preserves our humility. So it is in our national life. As Dr Mahathir pointed out, there is much to be grateful for in this country. Alas, in a perverse logic, some refuse to acknowledge the good that the Government has done for the greater interest of the people. It is inexcusable for them to mount baseless attacks on the Government's policies when they have benefited from them.

Syawal is also a time for reconciliation and forgiveness. Political foes must put the bitterness of the past behind them and rediscover the shared ideals which lie at the nation's strength and unity. For nothing can be gained by divisiveness and dissension. And it is a time to give. Fasting enables us to learn charity. In deed and in word, the people should give more of themselves for the higher productivity, peace and spiritual exultation of this country which shelters and nourishes us.

As we join our Muslim friends in celebrating Hari Raya, let us strengthen the binding force of mutual respect and tolerance upon which the nation's political and spiritual heritage is founded. Selamat Hari Raya.

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