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Let's cherish our culture of co-existence

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement the other day that a non-Malay and a non-Muslim could be prime minister of Malaysia one day had a mixed reception.

Whilst some welcomed the statement that we are looking towards a future when Malaysians will cease to be politically divided on grounds of race or religion, others have opined that the PM should not have stirred up a hornet's nest.

Perhaps the occasion for making the statement at the annual general meeting of the MCA where it was greeted with tremendous applause has given rise to varied perceptions and misconceptions. Some have even viewed it as a wake up call to the Malays. Whatever the reason for making the statement, Dr Mahathir was pointing out that under the Constitution there is no provision that a non-Malay or a non-Muslim cannot become prime minister.

Under the Constitution, to be appointed prime minister, a person must be an elected member of the Dewan Rakyat and must have been born in Malaysia. In addition, that person must command the confidence of the majority of the members of the Dewan Rakyat. I have advisedly used the word `person' because there is no provision in the Constitution that the PM should be a male. This should broaden the ongoing debate to include the prospect of a woman PM as well!

The Constitution provides that Islam is the religion of the Federation but it is still an open question whether Malaysia is an Islamic or secular state. However, because the majority of the population are Muslims, Malaysia is recognised internationally as an Islamic country.

Its membership and hosting of the recently concluded OIC foreign ministers conference in Kuala Lumpur is testimony of this fact. That being so, it is contended that the PM should be a Muslim.

It is argued however, that the requirement that the Head of an Islamic State should be a Muslim has been satisfied in Malaysia's case because the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, who is the Supreme Head of the Federation, is a Muslim. Some Muslims nonetheless disagree.

The concept of an Islamic State did not visualise a constitutional monarchy and as the real executive authority of the State is vested in the Prime Minister, then the PM should be a Muslim. Other ministers however, could be non-Muslims.

If political power is to be divided along racial or religious lines, then it should be clearly stated in the Constitution. Thus in Lebanon, the number of seats in the National Assembly is equally divided between Christians and Muslims.

By convention the president is a Maronite Christian, the speaker a Shi'ite and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim. Not having such provisions could result in what is happening in Fiji today. The native Fijians want their Constitution to provide that the office of prime minister should be held by a native Fijian only. Democracy in that country has resulted in an ethnic Indian being elected prime minister. Economic power is in the hands of the Indians but to lose political power as well is perhaps too much for the natives.

Malaysia is a multi-racial and multi-religious country. We are only Malaysian when we are abroad. At home the political divide is decidedly racial. Efforts at creating and sustaining multi-racial political parties

have not really succeeded so far. Every political party is identified by race.

The Gerakan and the DAP although multi-racial are both regarded as Chinese parties. Parti Rakyat is regarded as Malay. All political parties openly plead for causes on racial lines except Pas which projects itself for the cause of Islam. Umno is both Malay and Islamic.

We are even parochial. At the recent Telok Kemang by election a vital factor to the electorate was that the BN candidate was a local born whereas the opposing candidate was not although he was born in the State.

The question arises when can we be real Malaysians without regard to race or religion so that it does not matter who becomes Prime Minister. The short answer: Not in the foreseeable future!

We have nonetheless made much progress. Both at Federal and State Government levels political power is shared between the various races. Indeed several MPs are elected to office from constituencies which are not dominated by their own race. The recently elected Telok Kemang MP belongs to a minority race and his electorate consisted of racial majorities other than his own.

Malaysia's political strength and stability is that we have achieved a high degree of mutual respect and recognition of each other's race, religion and customs. Indeed we have successfully developed the art of co-existence.

So let it be. We should not ponder too much who should hold the office of prime minister. Much ado about nothing really.

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