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Malay rights inviolate

NATURE creates all men as equals; nurture fosters distinctions. That is the harsh reality faced by all who enjoin to form a united nation. The three major racial groups in the country were long segregated into different milieux. The divide-and-rule policy suited the colonists. But the consequences were grave as it created an economic caste system that proved to be untenable in the years after independence. The dusts of one conflagration were sufficient proof that the equation had to be changed if the country was to move on as one stable nation, with all its peoples living in harmony. And so the leaders of the land agreed that special rights and privileges should be accorded to Malays and other bumiputeras. The obverse side of this policy-coin was that other races would not be deprived and poverty among all would be eradicated.

That covenant provided the equilibrium to galvanise the country. The past three decades have seen much economic development that has improved the lives of all. But is it time to change the formula, as some quarters have asked? We agree with the Prime Minister who has pronounced it is not the time to dismantle policies that have worked but have not yet elevated the Malays to equal footing with others. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Thursday gave an assurance that Malay rights and privileges would be protected. Until, that is, the community itself decides otherwise, that it does not need the helping hand of the Government.

True, such affirmative actions might bristle many non-Malays. It is sad to behold many students from other racial groups who have scored 10As denied places in public universities. But intervention by the component parties of the Barisan Nasional has helped some of these bright students gain entrance into tertiary institutions funded by the Government. The policies initiated by the Government are flexible. As Dr Mahathir said, no one is oppressed in the protecting of Malay rights. The only problem is the executors who opt for the letter, not the spirit, of policies.

Critics who believe non-Malays are marginalised should realise that we do not live in an Utopian world where merits preponderate and are rewarded. They should stop basing their opinions on what they perceive in the public sector where the Malays have an undeniable advantage over others. But Government help stops at the entrance to a tertiary education. After that, they are on their own, though they might receive financial aid. Our public universities have a fair mix of teachers. And no self-respecting lecturer would permit his students to pass through his faculty without acquiring sufficient credits, be the student a Government sponsored Malay or a self-financed non-Malay.

But after graduation, most choose the private sector. Malay professionals no longer regard public service as preferred careers. They, like others, desire to harvest soonest the fruits of their years of study. But untold are the tales of discrimination and bias they face in the private sector. But they endure because they have self-esteem and they want to succeed on their own merits. One day, they would number a sufficient force to voice that enough is enough, that field should be level in both the private and public sectors. Until that day, it would be wise to keep debate on Malay rights and privileges private.

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