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Moving towards greater equality

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IN 43 years of Merdeka, we overcame the emergency (the communist insurgency), incorporated Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah. Though the union was prospering economically it was challenged by Indonesian Konfrontasi (confrontation), the separation of Singapore, and the vicious Chinese-Malay riots of May 13, 1969, recessions, several political crises (Musa Hitam, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Anwar Ibrahim).

And since 1981, the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, brought a new vigour to the government when he introduced Malaysia Inc, inspired by Japan's economic miracle. Like the nation he leads, he has survived a fractious leadership contest, splits in Umno and challenges from the increasingly bold Pas.

It's celebration time on Thursday - a day on which we reaffirm our faith in our nation. It makes every Malaysian feel good.

Intense conflict between Dr Mahathir-led government and Anwar Ibrahim-backed Opposition parties culminated in the nation's 10th general election after Independence.

Last November's general election was to some people a watershed poll and it was almost a referendum against some ruling politicians, especially a chance for the long-suffering Terengganu voters to throw out the increasingly hateful government of Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad which began in 1974 and for the Kelantanese to reaffirm their faith in the Pas government. Elsewhere, they voted against the Government to send a strong message to the ruling Umno and its component parties in Barisan Nasional (BN).

In more crucial ways, the 1999 general election was momentous because Pas (which made electoral gains) and DAP (which suffered losses) rose above their long-time prejudices to band together along with Keadilan (which performed very well but won only five parliamentary seats - four riding on Pas' back) and Parti Rakyat (which has never won a seat in Parliament on its own. In 1959, its president Ahmad Boestaman won a seat on a Socialist Front ticket) into a Barisan Alternatif (BA).

Though BA can by no means be written off - no matter how much its opponents wish it - it's not looking like a winner. But if I am proven wrong, the fault will lie in the main with the ruling Barisan Nasional, disappointing in many ways and yet so full of unity and tolerance in its tropes but lacking them in its behaviour.

In the four decades and three years, we have achieved much prosperity, progress, development and even harmony. Though I am now 63 years old, my memory has not dimmed much. I recall the good times in the past, nothing like what we are experiencing now. We are still a melting pot, unity in diversity.

Then as now, we are still bumiputeras, Malaysian Chinese, Malaysian Indians and Eurasians. Perhaps, a feeling of oneness (being Malaysian) has increased. To some people, it is on the contrary - it depends on whom you talk to.

Despite the proliferation of titles - bestowed or "purchased" - Malaysian society is becoming more democratised, fast becoming fairer, unsnobbish and even casual. Even the Malay society - especially after the New Economic Policy, though it did not fully succeed - has become less and less a top-down society. If you go to Bangsar and even Kok Lanas, you would know what I mean.

The non-Malays are apprehensive of Malay nationalism, which is actually waning, but wait until they come face to face with the increasingly aggressive conservative Islam which is being subtly introduced into the non-Muslim milieu courtesy of BA in the name of democratisation, and ultimately to capture Putrajaya. Then it would be too late to talk about transparency, tolerance, pluralism, democracy and good governance. The ulama or mullah would have been entrenched.

The Malays and bumiputeras not only want to survive but to lead. Umno wants to remain the sole party of the natives and it will do what it takes to win back their divided soul. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his crown prince, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, understand strong pressures are being applied to replace government and Umno leaders and policies. Their efforts will continue to be pursued more vigorously.

The nation, despite falling commodity prices, economic slowdown, recessions, regional financial crisis, the Al Ma'unah, the disgraceful Grik heist and bloody incident in Sauk, and crude attempts to fish in troubled racial waters remains peaceful, a remarkable measure of the ability and character of all Malaysians to put national interests above communal advancement.

We will overcome all problems if we abandon the tiresome and long-settled old battles. It was non-contentious until an unwise and indiscreet remark about what was being debated in a secret chamber was made public via a foreign publication.

The millennium is an exciting time to be in Malaysia. I sense a political and cultural change will soon take place which will either see the regeneration of leadership or retrogression.

The people want to see a fresh political and cultural vitality, and this cannot happen unless there is an upsurge in national pride accompanied by the desire for the creation of Bangsa Malaysia that is proud to proclaim its Malaysianness. We all should have come under fire for not being "Malaysian enough" after 43 years.

We are proud of our diversity. Malaya and now Malaysia has always been a divided country, race-wise. Divisions run like fissures - between various religious and cultural groups and even between Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia. It would be regrettable if "Malaysianness" continues to be defined narrowly. There is more to Malaysia than pantun and Bumiputera alienation, scepticism and cynicism and the aggrieved under-class.

Many Malaysians will take advantage - and many may even be in a hurry - to get out of Kuala Lumpur for the long weekend holiday.

I shall be thinking (and thankful) that despite everything, Malaysia remains the most dazzling and wonderful oasis in Asean, and those Malaysians who knock it still love it ferociously.

I wonder when the political leadership will finally confront the burning political issues and deny the opponents a battleground of their choice, deftly inviting the Government to compete on their particularist agendas.

Malaysians should be fighting for much more than their personal agendas and interests. Instead, even against odds, they should be the catalyst that will spur millions of others to fight for an even better future, an egalitarian society.

I am not asking too much, am I? Share my dream. Compared to other dreams, it is modest; but the spirit behind it must not be extinguished.

It is natural for the Opposition to assume that much of the prevailing political situation derives from its "success" in the last election in which Pas even captured a few urban and suburban seats. The Opposition MPs know they have little real power in Dewan Rakyat, which may be why they spend so much time holding ceramah and rallies as if the general election

is still on.

There is nothing new about Pas and DAP leaders hugging and kissing each other after a year of it, implying a bit untruthfully that each embraces the other's political goals. But, at least they have done what the Alliance and Barisan Nasional leaders have never got to doing in 48 years of coalition politics.

Malaysia has under Dr Mahathir favoured and become close to Japan (to support Malaysian industrialisation efforts), taken a high profile role in international affairs and movements.

The bipolar world and the real threat from Pas and its accomplices will continue to enliven Malaysian politics for some time to come and, I expect, Umno will have undergone a radical orientation well before the 11th general election. Shape up or lose out.

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