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Stamp communal extremism before it engulfs nation

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IT was once billed as the ruling party on which the sun never sets. Then the shadows began to lengthen. Umno, the jewel in the crown of Barisan Nasional looks like withering, however, it has to be watered and tended or loses its remarkable figure, vitality and freshness.

This is the time to look forward - and it is also the time to look backward. During the last November general election, there was a great deal of complaining about Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's administration and there is nothing people like to hear more than what a "terrible and shocking" deal they have been getting from "the Pharaoh" - the name Pas and Keadilan politicians unfairly gave the Prime Minister. They just love to liken him to the ruler of ancient Egypt Pharaoh Rameses II.

The people voted a motley of 45 Opposition MPs into Parliament and in Kelantan, the people reaffirmed their undivided faith in Pas while in Terengganu, as expected, Pas won the State Government, as it were, on a silver platter.

But the vote-catching and captivating rhetoric apart, what is the truth about us? Surely, it is that here is a prosperous and peaceful nation, a model for developing and developed countries of how to administer a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious existence.

Malaysia has been governed by the 14-party coalition, Barisan Nasional, led by men of courage and vision.

Two decades of comparatively effective government have resulted, by and large, in the highest standard of living in Asean, with the exception of Singapore. As intelligent Malaysians, we recognise the enormous progress and benefits brought to us by the present rulers.

Forty-three years on last Thursday, the quest for racial unity remains the defining political and moral issue of our time.

Five days into the 44th year, let us all resolve to vanquish racial discord now and I pray for the day - not during my lifetime - when all can be treated equally: Bumiputeras not discriminated against in the private sector and the other Malaysians in the public sector.

Let me be the first to admit that ethnicity or race still means "different" for many Malaysians as it does to Americans, Australians, Europeans and Japanese.

In the US, where I lived a total of seven years over three different periods, I still see that Americans are neatly divided into white, black, yellow, brown and red. People see these categories as essentially different. Originally, the whites were infected by their white federal and state governments.

The others, like Hitler, told the white race that God created these categories of human beings and made some better than others. The Jews claim they are the chosen people, as do Muslims. Tiger Woods proves that blacks are not inferior to whites, as does General Colin Powell.

The truth is that Malaysia and Singapore, for that matter, are more than a mixture of races, languages and religions.

The Malaysian population of 22 million people are mainly Bumiputeras, Chinese, Indians and others, including foreign "guest workers", many of whom are Indonesians. I have no hard facts but I do not believe I am wrong when I say Malaysia may be home to more Indonesians than any place outside Indonesia.

At Independence, Bumiputeras were a substantial minority (48 per cent). Now their birth rate is steady. The Chinese are a bit worried because the community's declining birth rate could spell a loss of political influence though they admit readily their economic dominance is very secure.

The Indians are unfazed; indeed it seems they are relieved it lessens the community's social burden. They appear, which is wise, like the Chinese, to want quality which is better than numbers.

The Indians may be one of the most marginalised communities, but they are comforted by the fact that more than 30 per cent of all doctors and slightly less than 30 per cent of all lawyers in Malaysia are Indians. Three of Malaysia's internationally well-connected super-rich tycoons are members of the community - Ananda Krishnan, Tan Sri A.P. Arumugam and Tan Sri Kishu Tirathrai. The Indians form between eight and 10 per cent of the population.

The Bumiputeras lag behind everybody except in politics, administration, the Armed Forces and the Police. The Chinese and Indians will do well because both races put a very high premium on education. I believe, increasingly, the education and economic future of the Bumiputeras will also depend on the industry of Malaysian Chinese and the talent of Indians who will form a larger and larger number of teachers, lawyers, doctors, business people, entrepreneurs and even inventors.

Maybe the Bumiputeras should take stock of their position. After all, I am told that more than 30 per cent of the high-tech start-ups in Silicon Valley are run by entrepreneurs of Indian and Chinese ancestry.

Whatever, this is good for our future because the productive relationship between the Chinese, Indians and Bumiputeras will be essential for our prosperity. I wish the Chinese industry and Indian talents will rub on to the Bumiputeras.

The Bumiputeras, despite affirmative action programmes, are like a time bomb waiting to explode because they still have the highest number of school dropouts, dadah addicts, low achievers, large families and broken homes and generally remain an unfocused people, confused by the demands of the present world and the next.

The influence of Islam, whether political or otherwise, is very strong and pervasive. Islam is the current vogue among them. The proliferation of new Islamic thoughts, some incorrect, is a fact, and unless harnessed into a positive direction quickly, the purveyors of the "new teachings" will become - indeed have become - strong enough to challenge the established order, hence the present Malay political divide which can spark trouble anytime in the future.

Malaysians of all colours must keep on reminding themselves that they are more than just a collection of 22 million individuals, they are one nation and one people.

Ideally, nationhood is about essentially erasing differences to be moulded into one cast. But to expect it to happen in 43 years is a bit unrealistic, I think.

As we accept the challenge to build a united "Bangsa Malaysia", we can slowly mend racial polarisation and divisions which exist. Meanwhile, make much of these differences, which if channelled into the right direction can, and have created uncommon energy, vitality and creativity.

I have ceased to consider race or colour in my dealings a long time ago. What will only matter is whether one is a good lawyer, doctor, journalist or editor. And ideally, it is already happening, on an increasing basis here, that love rather than race should determine whether two persons marry.

All sane and patriotic Malaysians must fight those who foment racial hatred. We do hold the key and have the ability to do that. Whatever we do

should be beyond racial consideration and assist the authorities against the people's enemies who are deliberately seeking to undermine stability and replace it with racial uprising.

We either leave the young to harvest the fruits of our rich diversity or suffer the aftermath of increased racial tension and hatred.

Let us begin anew. There could be some friction and discomfort before the Government adjusts and accepts that it has to deal with more confident and aggressive enemies of the state, racial harmony and peace.

Dr Mahathir has said he has hitherto two regrets - one is that he has allowed extremism to rear its ugly head which now threatens us all and the economy. Stamp it before it breathes fire and engulfs the nation.

We must make the pursuit of unity and obligation. We either advance together or we will suffer because none can live and prosper in isolation.

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