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The meaning of Merdeka

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THESE reflections on Merdeka and what it means for us all today are penned in the hope of providing an insight into the meaning of this great moment in history so that it will make us all aware, especially those of us of the younger generation, of its importance, and being aware make us grateful for the courage and sacrifices of our forefathers who struggled for our country's independence.

It is of the greatest importance that their efforts and sacrifices should not have been in vain. For we must always be conscious of the real meaning of Merdeka so that we are for ever on guard against any threat, from within or without, that could result in our losing our freedom once more.

I don't think we need go into the philosophical concept or meaning of independence - the Oxford Dictionary definition is good enough, i.e., put in general terms, not depending on authority, self government; not depending on something else for validity or efficacy or on another person for livelihood or opinions; unwilling to be under the obligation of others.

The concept of 'independence' is very closely linked to the still more powerful concept of 'freedom' - of liberty of action, of being free and having personal or civil liberty. Of course 'freedom' here is freedom within the limits of the law.

This cry for freedom, for independence is nothing new. It has been heard in many other parts of the world, especially over the past two hundred years. The American Revolution of the 1770s, when the American colonists overthrew British rule, led the way.

But the most famous cry of all is that of the great French Revolution which followed in the American wake, with its slogan of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. This call which has been echoed in all the great revolutionary movements which have taken place ever since - the independence movements in Latin America against Spanish domination led by great leaders like Simon Bolivar during the nineteenth century; the Swaraj campaign led by Gandhi for Indian independence in the 1930s and 1940s, and the nationalist movements which swept Africa after the Second World War, such as that led by Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya with his rallying cry of Ahuru! (Freedom) and by Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana. And, of course, nearer home, the cry of Merdeka! in Indonesia and in our own country.

All these movements have had basically the same purpose and meaning - freedom to manage one's own affairs and those of one's own country without foreign control or interference. The call for independence is also a matter of human dignity - freedom to chart a nation's destiny according to the will and ingenuity of its own citizens, which meant, of course, in our own context, to be free from British colonial rule and its exploitation.

The Tunku is said to have gone so far as to have remarked on one occasion in the 1950s - "Better a bad government than a foreign government."

In modern world history, we read of illustrious leaders, freedom fighters and patriots who fought with passion and at the cost of immense personal sacrifices for their beloved countries, in order to liberate them from foreign domination and achieve their independence. In this connection such names as Garibaldi of Italy, Bismark of Germany, Kemal Ataturk of Turkey, Jinnah of Pakistan, Sun Yat Sen of China, Jose Rizal of

Philippines, Aung San of Burma, and Sukarno of Indonesia will never be forgotten. Nor will those of Dato' Onn Jaffar and Tengku Abdul Rahman, the founding fathers of our own nation, Malaysia, along with the many other leaders of all communities who supported them, including - to name a few - Tun Tan Cheng Lock and his son Tun Tan Siew Sin, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Dato' Nik Mohamad Kamil, Dato' Panglima Bukit Gantang, Tun H.S. Lee, Tun Sambanthan, Temenggung Jugah, Dato' Ong Kee Hui, Tan Sri Kalong Ningkan, Tun Abdul Rahman Yakub, Tun Mustapha and Tun Fuad Stephens and others.

In our context, the development of national consciousness in the form of opposition to colonial or anti foreign domination can be seen to have taken place in two phases. The first started just after the First World War in early 1920s and came to an end with the Japanese invasion and conquest of 1941. The main protagonists here were a new generation of Malays who felt threatened by the huge influx of Chinese and Indians immigrants into the peninsula, and who articulated the very real Malay fear of being swamped in their own homeland (watan or Tanah Melayu) by bangsa asing.

Hence the pioneer nationalists of Malaysia were Malays who were more concerned with seeking a salvation of their own people from the incursion of the economically more aggressive immigrant races brought in to serve British interests. Therefore these pioneer Malay nationalists demanded more and better educational opportunities for their children, more scholarships and openings in the government administration, protection of their land against foreign ownership, and a bigger voice in the British-dominated legislatures, at both State and federal (FMS) level. They also reminded the British of the promises they had made at the time they made treaties with the Malay Rulers to protect and develop Malay interests. But at this stage the demand for outright independence was still a muffled cry.

Two groups amongst the Malays during the first phase played a prominent role in arousing a nationalist consciousness. One was that played by Malay journalists who were able to take advantage of this introduction of a modern press and newspapers to act as agents for change, spreading the idea of justice, highlighting the problems of Malay poverty, and preaching the right of the rakyat to fight for their own interests against British colonialism.

The second group comprised Malay school teachers, who were able to carry out their nationalist crusades in the thousands of classroom that the British had opened throughout Malaya and the Straits Settlements. In this connection, the Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjong Malim, founded in 1922, became a very powerful centre for the propagation of nationalist ideas and the stimulation of nationalist fervour through the lessons given by lecturers such as Abdul Hadi Hassan and Buyong Adil, and the deeds of former students such as Ibrahim Yaakob who became a nationalist leader, and Harun Aminurrashid who spread the nationalist message through their writings.

Furthermore, they had all been influenced by the heroic struggles of the Indonesian nationalists against the Dutch, through literature or by contacts with Indonesian radicals.

Modern Malay literature which underwent a renaissance in the 1930s in the form of novels, short stories and poems also played a significant role in fostering a Malay nationalist consciousness and in stressing the need for political emancipation.

Furthermore, the fight to expose colonial injustices and the struggle to obtain a better deal for the Malays was carried on by members of the Malay elite such as Dato' Onn Jaffar in Warta Malaya and later in the Johor

Council Negeri, as by Raja Chulan and other members of the Malay aristocracy in the other States Councils.

Za'aba, Malaya's foremost intellectual and man of letters had of course been writing as early as the 1920s calling for the Malays to change their ways so as to improve their economic lot through education and by adopting the ideals of the Islamic reforms movement, inspired by Mohamad Abduh, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, in the late nine-teenth century, whose standard-bearers in this country were labelled the Kaum Muda. All this was long before he was appointed chairman of the historic convenors' meeting that gave birth to Umno in 1946.

Meanwhile other events and development both inside and outside the country created a snowball effect on the development of nationalist consciousness. The introduction and spread of Western education in the country from the latter part of the nine-century onwards helped create a small middle class so necessary for change in the society, while the opening up of the peninsula, and in particular the spread of modern communication - roads, railways, telephone and wireless, etc - spurred nationalist consciousness still further.

In other words the policies and innovations of British colonialism itself proved a strong catalyst for nationalism.

The developments in other parts of the world in the 1920s and 1930s such as the collapse of the Ottoman (Turkish) Caliphate, the growing strength of the nationalist movement in India, and the rising Japanese defiance of the Western imperialist powers in East Asia, sent out persuasive messages which stoked the fires of nationalism in the Malay peninsula before the Second World War.

The second phase in the development of nationalism in Malaysia came with the Japanese Occupation and takes us to 1963 when Malaysia itself came into being as a sovereign state. The Japanese Occupation, of course, changed everything. It opened the eyes of the people, and although they suffered much during the three-and-a-half years of Japanese rule, they also gained much in terms of sense of pride, self-esteem and self-confidence.

When the war was over and the Occupation came to an end, momentous events followed - first the Malayan Union struggle, followed almost immediately by the Communist uprising in the Malay peninsula known as the Emergency.

Against this dramatic background Malaysia's up-and-coming leaders took stock of what was happening around them, and began to draw up their strategies to win independence from their British colonial masters. Their political objectives became crystallised, the obstacles in the way identified and solutions found to overcome them. Within 10 years of the end of the Japanese Occupation, the goal of independence - at least, for the time being for Malaya - was clearly in sight and its achievement inevitable. By 1955, it was only a question of the most opportune time.

Apart from dealing with the British, the biggest problem which Malayan - no longer Malay - nationalists in the peninsula faced was the bid of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) to seize power and establish a Malayan Communist republic. Although the Communists also wanted independence from the British, the vast majority of Malaysians did not agree with their ideology or their methods. Moreover, the MCP spurned the initiative made by Tunku Abdul Rahman at the Baling Talks to offer them amnesty and peace.

On the other hand, the radical wing of nationalism represented by Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy, Ishak Muhammad and Ahmad Boestamam was acceptable to some as they had the same goal of independence, but they failed to gain mainstream support because they espoused a more militant and socialist approach and had leanings towards union with Indonesia. In any case, when

the Emergency started, their movement was banned by the British as a security threat.

The mainstream Malayan leadership of the 1950s chose to continue the struggle for independence by constitutional and peaceful means, by means of negotiations between the three main ethnic group involved and discussions with the British.

The outcome was the formation in 1953 of the Alliance Party, comprising Umno and the MCA, to which the MIC were admitted in 1954. The Alliance Party became the most powerful vehicle for Malayan nationalism in the subsequent negotiations with the British which led to the transfer of sovereign power to the people and the proclamation of Merdeka for the Federation of Malaya on 31st August 1957. A similar strategy, using constitutional means, peaceful negotiations and consensus, led to the second crowning political success of the Nation, with the establishment of the larger federation of Malaysia in 1963.

All this was achieved only after there had been a lot of give and take by all parties and races concerned. The Malay Rulers led the way, in that although their sovereignty and powers were restored to them by the British, they willingly surrendered their powers and prerogatives to the elected representatives of the rakyat. The second big sacrifice was that made by the Malays themselves, through whose magnanimity millions of non-Malays were enabled to become their fellow citizens of this country based on the principle of jus soli. No sovereign people in history anywhere in the world have been prepared to share the rights and privileges of citizenship with such a large number of immigrants in their own country, as was done on this occasion by the Malays.

As part of the unwritten social contract, the non-Malays agreed to live in harmony with the sons of the soil and to respect their special privileges and positions as provided for in the Constitution, and thereafter to collaborate with one another in the task of nation-building and reconstruction. The Chinese community who dominated commerce and industries in Malaysia were expected to extend a helping hand to the Malays and other Bumiputeras by way of affording opportunities for training or partnership in their companies and thereby ensuring the Malays a more equitable participation and contribution in the economic life of the nation.

Foreigners who at first were sceptical about the viability of the newly-independent state of Malaya, then Malaysia, were surprised that we survived, grew strong, and united, living in harmony with one another and without civil strife except for one lamentable occasion, in spite of the great diversity of communities and cultures. And that one exception, the 13 May Incident of 1969, which could have led to the collapse of the entire Malaysian experiment, did not; instead we became more united than ever before.

Foreigners want to know the secret of our success which has made Malaysia so nique. The answer lies in this power sharing concept or formula embedded in the great compromise of the unwritten social contract, which reflects the high level of political wisdom possessed by the peoples of Malaysia.

With freedom and independence achieved, we have entered another phase of the nationalist struggle. For the struggle has not ended here with Merdeka. The task we are coping with now is the more difficult one of fulfilling the aspiration and promises of independence.

The struggle to bring British rule was not as an end in itself, but represented the first step towards national reconstruction and the fashioning of new nation.

Since the achievement of independence we have seen an energetic

programme of reforms in all sectors, all of which are aimed at creating a strong, stable and prosperous nation. The promise of Merdeka was dignity, a better deal and an improved quality of life for all Malaysians, irrespective of race, colour or creed. For any new nation this is a most daunting task - all the more so for those nations which had to choose a revolutionary struggle to achieve their independence and suffered heavy damage to their administrative, social and economic systems, making rebuilding a slow and painful process.

In this respect we have been fortunate. The British left behind a good system of administration and a good legal system. Malaysianisation of the Civil Service proceeded without a hitch and development went on at full speed ahead. In this regard the nation owes a great debt of gratitude to the large number of civil servants, professionals and intellectuals who provided innovative ideas and loyal support in their various capacities in the the running of a modern government, especially in the early years of the administration, notably Tun Abd Aziz Majid, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Tan Sri Kadir Shamsudin, Tan Sri Abdullah Ayob, Raja Mohar Bidiozaman, Aminuddin Baki, Dr Ungku Omar, Ungku Abdul Aziz Hamid, Tun Ismail Ali and Tun Suffian Hashim.

The achievement of Merdeka was a great achievement, an achievement which normally happens only once in the history of a nation. It is therefore a great responsibility which the younger generation have to assume in honouring the trust bestowed upon them by their fathers to maintain and cherish the independence which is ours. The process leading to Merdeka was a long and arduous one, spanning almost half a century, demanding great sacrifice, labour and effort on many fronts, and involving patriots and activists from all walks of life from every corner of the land.

It is now up to the new generation to protect this Merdeka from threat and harm, and to develop our independent nation and raise it to greater heights than was ever possible before. Last but not least, it is for the younger generation never to forget the great debt of gratitude that they owe to their fathers and grandfathers who struggled so hard and so long to achieve the freedom that we enjoy today.

This country has been blessed by God with a galaxy of very able, dedicated and wise leaders, starting with Tunku Abdul Rahman, followed by Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who between them have contributed so much to the uninterrupted progress, dignity and peace of our country over the past 43 years.

They have transformed this country from a typical colonial economy where we were the mere producers of raw materials for the factories and mills of the industrialised world into one with a modern, industrialised economy of our own which can hold its own in the world market, and which has won the envy and respect of other nations.

This has only been possible because Malaysians of all races have given their unstinted support to the Government throughout all these years, and because they are united and disciplined, and live in harmony with each other and respect one another despite their cultural and religious differences.