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Tolerance - key to success

IT is not a hollow observation. The minorities in Malaysia, as pointed out by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his Chinese New Year message, are a very fortunate lot. Unlike some minorities in certain parts of the world, they can maintain their respective identity and observe their religion, culture and tradition without restrictions.

The nation's civil fabric is not violated by any form of congenital neurosis, which is not accessible to rational comprehension such as anti-Semitism. Nor is it tainted by any racist belief that might discriminate others or put them on the periphery of society. But the peace and harmony enjoyed by the people would not have been achieved without their long-standing spirit of tolerance. There is every reason for all Malaysians, irrespective of race or creed, to take immense pride in this spirit of tolerance. It is this spirit of tolerance which has brought success to the country and its socio-economic endeavours.

Such a spirit is evident in our families, religious institutions, corridors of schools, lecture halls and dormitories of universities and the workplace. It is seen in the heartfelt participation of Malaysians in the religious or cultural celebrations of their friends and neighbours. There is no oddity in the sight of baju kurung-clad Chinese and Indians joining the Muslims in celebrating Hari Raya Aidil Fitri or the Muslims ushering in the Chinese New Year with their Chinese friends. The merry-making is shared by all and sundry.

Our spirit of tolerance has proven to be resilient in the face of challenges. Unlike some countries, it is not a veneer that only holds as long as material prosperity keeps the country's civility from being put to the test. The economic crisis in certain countries witnessed the resentment against another race acquiring a new volatility. Our detractors asserted that our economic success served as a kind of surrogate self-confidence which concealed inner political hollowness. An economic crisis, they said, would unravel our political stability. But we proved them wrong. We showed our true countenance as a unified country during the economic problems. The West will continue to make a bogeyman of our democracy as long as they feel our leadership does not kowtow to them. But the years of democracy in some Western countries do not make them civil as seen from the radical, chauvinistic and xenophobic acts of violence there.

However, it is easy to be complacent or take things for granted. Easy it is too to forget those arduous years of our forefathers who made sacrifices to bring forth the country's independence. The level of sophistication which we enjoy now does not give us the right to brush aside as historical excrement our forefathers' efforts to weave in unity into our social fabric. The tendency of the elders to remind the young of the racial riots of May 13, 1969, does not stem from an irrational fear of ghosts from the past. Nor is the fear of this inconceivable incident omnipresent. But the elders recognise the need to pay heed to history, for, as seen in volatile parts of the world, not heeding the past will allow a cultured nation to slip into barbarism.

The sensitivities shown in our handling of all matters pertaining to religion and race do not indicate a weakness in our unity. Rather, it demonstrates the strength of our unity. As we usher in the Year of the Dragon, we will continue to manifest our tolerance in word and in deed. Gong Xi Fa Cai.

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