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Towards an egalitarian society

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IT'S celebration time on Thursday - our 43rd Merdeka anniversary which will be an occasion to reaffirm our faith in our nation. It makes every Malaysian feels 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 direct 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 of which 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 sixty-three 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. As Lee Kuan Yew rightly says, we cannot gel nationhood out of diversity in 35 years (in Singapore's case) and us in 43 years. 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 with whom you talk.

For sure, there are many things that have happened and are occurring which I would have liked to have been done differently. Many changes I had hoped for have not taken place, but I will persevere and I hope I will have the opportunity to help carry them out one day.

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 diminishing, but wait until they come face to face with the increasingly and aggressively powerful conservative Islam which is being subtly introduced to the non-Muslim milieu courtesy of BA in the name of democratisation and ultimately of capturing 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 as the sole party of the natives and it will do what it takes to recapture the soul of the restive and divided natives. 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 AlMaunah, the disgraceful Grik heist and bloody incident in Sauk, and crude attempts to fish in racial-troubled sungai 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, not excluding the chauvinistic demands and counter-demands, 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, which has not been known to be fond of Malaysia and even less of its majority people.

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.

Blaming English colonialism and its divide-and-rule policy has always been a good excuse and even a good way of emphasising our difficulty in our nation building. However, young Malaysians will not buy that.

We are proud of our diversity. Malaya and now Malaysia has always been a divided country, race-wise. Divisions run like fissures in Malaysian society - 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 pantuns and Bumiputera alienation, scepticism and cynicism and the aggrieved Underclass.

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 am not going anywhere. I will be at home recovering from too many late nights of work and parties.

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.

Like other Malaysians, I dream of noble and lofty goals. Until my dream is crackled by political realism, our sights must be focused on the future.

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. I

hope you will agree.

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 sub-urban 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. Just read the Harakah diary and the Rocket diary and you will know what I mean.

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, first pioneered by Umno and MCA in 1952.

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