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Ho-pe for a new future

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THE countdown to National Day celebration is drawing close. And for different people, independence holds different meanings. For many, it spells liberation and freedom which come in many forms, including on the political and economic front.

On that note, it would be interesting to know the kind of thoughts that raced through Datuk Richard Ho's mind when, in 1957, he got wind that independence was just around the corner.

A Government officer then (he was 30 years old), the Sitiawan-born was thrilled at the notion of independence.

Ho knew nothing about politics then nor had the slightest inclination for it.

Yet independence held a special significance. It spelt hope, access to a better education and a brighter future.

Ho, who is now the vice-chairman of Maybank, said we were fortunate that the British had given us a good infrastructure to build our path towards progress.

Independence, reminisced the 74-year-old Ho, gave him hope of a bright, new future but he knew it could only be realised through hard work.

"As I saw it, we would only stand to gain from the country's new status," he said.

In his Declaration of Independence, the Tunku had succinctly pointed out that it was freedom for the Malayan people, and once this torch of freedom was lit, we should hold it up high so that all around us would glow with happiness.

"Let freedom be secured for all the law-abiding people. There shall be freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom from want, freedom of association, freedom of assembly and of movement," he declared.

Ho said the declaration formed the basis of his thoughts about independence.

He wholeheartedly shared Tunku's sentiments that "freedom should be within the context of the law".

This meant that "there shall be no abuse. Freedom of movement does not imply that you can gun anyone down. Similarly, freedom of association does not mean that you can form secret societies."

He reasoned that "absolute freedom is not possible because of the needs of the time".

Ho agreed with the Declaration which stated:

"We shall build our social economic and educational structures so that the new nation will hold its head sturdy and proud and the people will be happy and contented."

"No matter who you are, live in harmony in this glorious land of ours. We have worked for this day and we have won independence not by any act of violence but by constitutional means, through mutual goodwill, understanding and trust.

"Let us not abuse this trust, but honour it so that others will honour us. A nation born with honour will tread the path of glory."

Ho stressed that "the country parted with the British as friends, hence there was no ill-will".

He was also thankful that there was no bloodshed.

"Independence made me realise that I would have access to a better education. For many of us, we were not thinking of wealth but only a

respectable place in society."

Perhaps this explained his excitement when there was talk of a British return.

He remembered being well-treated by the British, and that they were just and fair as well as conducted themselves with integrity.

In fact, it was the British who helped him gain entry into missionary schools.

However, he cautioned that his wanting the British presence should not be misconstrued as being unpatriotic.

"It was just a feeling of the moment. More importantly, independence should provide quality of life so that we didn't have to scrape for a living."

Japanese rule left many with bitter memories. Ho was no exception. He was barely 14 when the Japanese invaded the country in 1941.

Their iron-fist rule made him realise how dreadful it was to be under foreign military rule.

He remembers solemnly the cruelty and the brutality of the Japanese Occupation.

The Japanese intrusive presence was synonymous with malnutrition and endless consumption of tapioca until he got "so sick of it".

At one point, he said, he was so "undernourished that even a simple cut took a long time to heal".

Such hardships helped him to learn discipline and how to survive.

"I had to venture out to the open seas and the jungle with my kid brothers to put food on the table.

"My father was not of robust health. Besides my parents, I had to support my mother and six other siblings," said Ho.

His friends taught him to grow padi. But the jubilation of having a regular supply of food was short-lived. Disaster struck when pests destroyed his crops.

"For us, everyday was an Outward Bound School experience," he said.

He had to drag himself up in the wee hours of the morning to chase away the wild elephants which were also destroying the crops.

More significantly, Japanese rule taught him that he could not rely on anyone.

For Ho then, life became a continuous struggle for survival.

"The Declaration (of Independence) nurtured hopes and aspirations. As people become more educated, they will have different aims such as acquiring more wealth and increasing their status.

"We are a multi-racial society. Everybody wants a cut of the pie - these are legitimate claims."

Ho lauds all the Prime Ministers who played their part to achieve the objectives according to the needs of their respective times.

"The Tunku was the right person for his time. The people simply adored him," he said.

"He was the happiest Prime Minister of all," he added.

He also noted that Tun Abdul Razak was a workaholic who tackled rural development as a priority.

Tun Hussein Onn, meanwhile, was a gentleman and the Father of Unity. He was respected for his fairness, said Ho.

He added that this because he was a lawyer who believed in the principles of natural justice and fairness.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is the most dynamic Prime Minister of all, said Ho.

For Dr Mahathir, 24 hours a day is too little, said Ho, adding that the Prime Minister is a "highly courageous man who does what he thinks is right although he is aware it is going to make him unpopular".

He is also a combative person but that's his nature, added Ho.

"He has to be combative if he is to get what he wants done. Certainly, he is a man ahead of his time. History will judge him more justly than his present critics," said Ho.

Ho is disturbed about the violence and crime prevailing in society today.

The root of the problem is, in his opinion, due to our failure to adhere to the Declaration of Independence.

He also blames social ills on external factors "which are beyond our control".

"These have to be addressed more aggressively and effectively by the present administration," he said.

He feels that parents should exercise greater control over their children.

"This means teaching them not only what they can and cannot do but also not to forget that whatever they do could have harmful consequences on others," he says.

But having two teenage children of his own, he chuckles that this is certainly a tall order.

On racial harmony, he said: "We should not disrupt this delicate balance."

Lamenting that today's generation will never understand what independence is all about, he said: "We need to find a balanced approach. Making money is not the only aim in life. Equally important is how to live with the other races. All religions encourage racial tolerance but being human, we are caught by our competing pursuance of material gains."