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It is in everyone's interest that the Malay unity talks should succeed

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A HISTORIC event will be taking place exactly a week from now when two Malay-based political parties begin discussing problems facing the community.

Many were sceptical about the Malay unity talks between the United Malay National Organisation (Umno) and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Pas). And they were quite right too, given the wide divide between the two.

Not many had confidence the talks would ever take place. It is clear that Umno is sincere about the talks. Pas initially appeared keen, then it seemed to be back pedalling, giving the impression that it was not quite as interested as Umno was.

All that is immaterial now as the talks are to be held on Feb 19 - at a venue to be decided soon.

What is important now is that there is a commitment to meet openly and discuss frankly a common goal for the long-term interest of the ummah.

This is not about who is giving in and who is being conciliatory. Nothing should now be in the way of having this meeting between two major parties - both the legitimate representatives of the Malays.

Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Pas counterpart Datuk Fadzil Mohd Noor will each lead a six-member delegation to the talks.

The Umno-initiated meeting will be a new beginning for both parties and the Malay community.

It is hoped that trivialities will not be an obstacle to realising the effort to bring about unity among the Malays.

It cannot be denied that Malay unity is the cornerstone of national unity and crucial for the continuing peace and stability of the country. It is not an issue that is dear only to the Malays, but other races as well.

It is in everyone's interest that the talks should succeed, at least, in keeping that valuable momentum to forge some kind of understanding between the two parties.

"The fact that the talks will materialise is a good start. From there, both parties can find some common ground to discuss the future of the Malays," said a political commentator.

The important thing is for Umno and Pas to face each other and admit the fact that the Malays are divided and this situation is unhealthy.

It is time for Umno and Pas to stop slugging it out openly, criticising each other outside the confines of their party conferences.

Certainly, many Malays are concerned that mosques have been used as a political arena. Some have openly criticised this, but it has not stopped.

What will eventually take hold during the discussions or what the outcome will be remain to be seen. Many are hopeful the event will be successful in establishing an understanding which can open the doors to future discussions.

Umno certainly is not too ambitious. It does not expect to resolve the Malay issues at one sitting. Both parties have many grievances about each other.

The two sides do not expect to wrap up discussions on Feb 19.

But, a deal has been made. Already, Umno has demonstrated a conciliatory stand, agreeing to the date and format which Pas had proposed.

Dr Mahathir himself is accommodating, saying that there will be no

restriction to the agenda.

"We will be open to all topics," he said on Saturday after chairing the Umno supreme council meeting.

Flexibility seems to be key in this given that Pas has been pushing for the talks to focus on national unity, which it believes is more urgent than the issue of Malay unity.

Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, who is Pas mursyidul am (spiritual adviser) and Kelantan Menteri Besar, has thanked Dr Mahathir for his sincerity.

He said he was grateful to Allah "for opening the hearts of both Umno and Pas members to agree to the talks", referring to the many Pas members who did not agree to such discussions.

For the sceptics, Feb 19 would have been elusive. It no longer is. It represents that golden opportunity neither Umno nor Pas wants to let pass. Both know that the issue at hand is too critical to ignore. And having taken steps to begin pouring oil on troubled waters, both know that neither will lose.

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