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National unity: An old horse knows the way

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THERE is an ancient Chinese idiom which says: "When a dog leaves its home, it can always find its way back." A horse, I am told, also has the same ability.

An old horse should remember the road it has travelled. So, let us bear the burden so that the old horse continues to lead us.

Someone who has experience or anyone very familiar with our situation has a better chance (or ability) to lead us during a difficult time (and in a crisis).

Malaysia is an oasis of stability in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean). It enjoys a higher standard of living and is richer than the other Asean member nations except Singapore.

The ruling party (Umno-led coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN) from 1974) has won 10 successive general elections since 1959, and 11 if you include the only general election held in British Malaya in 1955. During a period, soon to be 44 years since independence on August 31 1957, I am afraid I must say the truth: the ruling coalition has, unfortunately, become baggy or insipid and even jejune because of self-indulgence.

If they did not shape up they would be thrown out. What forged a bond of trust between old Umno and generations of voters has weakened. As has the national unity for reasons not unconnected with Malay politics and the politics of other Malaysians.

Last Saturday, I attended (did not participate, was contented to be a listener) the Women's Institute of Management's national unity roundtable conference at its new all-purpose headquarters in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, Kuala Lumpur. It was an eyeopener even for me. A well-intentioned discourse graced by an aging elitist group of prominent personalities and successful professionals, three quarters of whom were titled, state or federal, deserved or otherwise.

How I wish the Women's Institute of Management (WIM) will hold another roundtable conference on national unity which will include a mixed bag of Malaysians from every level of society and competing political persuasions. A participant said, "Open your minds to the views and aspirations of the younger generation, particularly about racial relations and unity."

The speaker was Tan Sri Razali Ismail, a former president of the UN General Assembly. Tan Sri Musa Hitam, chairman of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam), proposed the formation of a national consultative council or a royal commission to make an indepth study of the problems confronting the nation. To him, the problems appear too numerous and not difficult to solve!

Datuk Nellie S.L. Tan-Wong, the organising chairperson of the roundtable stated that "all races are the guardians of values, ideas, policies.... some are more idealistic, some are more cosmopolitan and universal but others, more parochial and ethocentric".

Whatever, I am a great believer, up to a point, of letting one hundred flowers bloom and one hundred schools of thought contend. Let the people talk and argue (behind closed doors, of course) about everything. Let them deliberate and let them forward the outcome to the Government for consideration.

Next week, a larger twoday convention on the same subject organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (ASLI) will take place

starring the Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi with co-stars from MCA, MIC and Gerakan. Guest stars are Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu, Tan Sri Mohd Khir Johari, Tan Sri Musa Hitam and several others, including the writer.

I deliberately did not say anything at the WIM round table because I will have plenty to say when I speak on "Overcoming impediments to National Unity addressing the roots, managing conflicts and regenerating confidence", a subject which ASLI chose for me.

We shall, during the convention, examine what is the current status of national unity, should the BN reconstitute itself as a single broad-based political party instead of the coalition of major communal and statebased parties, internal contradictions; how to mitigate and contain racial, religious and even occupational divide and geographical residence.

About the limits against religious and ethnic extremism and provocations, the need to make aware about the social contracts which are binding on the Bumiputeras and the other Malaysians. I shall caution the people and the Government alike about potential 'flashpoints' which must be nipped in the bud.

Fight against poverty must transcend race and religion as is access to higher education; the need to manifest a greater sense of belonging, equitable sharing of the national and corporate wealth all this and more will spare us all future disharmony, latent or in the open.

Some well-meaning people speak about hurt feelings, which if unchecked, will and must breed deep hatred. Absolutely. But racial wound or sakit hati, like marginalisation, depends on who is the speaker. If you listen to a Pas leader, anything which to him appears as secular is an affront to Islam, and to an average non-Muslim Malaysian, the nation is fast (and no longer subtly) being turned into a monopolar society. So, when one speaks, he or she must also be prepared to listen to other side. As they say, any story, like any coin, has two faces.

I was at the Umno closed-door meeting last Friday. What was said there was both comforting and frightening.

I deplore the arrogance, bigotry, greed and the belligerence of a particular section of a particular community as much as I lament at the intolerance and delusion of the other side of the fence.

They are not only dense but stoneblind politically. Malaysia is not Singapore, Taiwan nor Indonesia, Saudi Arabia or Iran.

On independence, we faced almost the same threats which today confront us albeit they have become less dire. Still, they make us vulnerable because the protagonists are a group of blind men trying to size up an elephant. They only know of the part they feel, as a result because they do not feel the whole animal they make wrong conclusion. They are dangerous.

Perhaps, the time has come, as Musa says it is, for the Government to set up a National Consultative Council on National Unity.

During and following the vicious race riots in Kuala Lumpur 32 years and a day ago, all races were in the depths of despair but in less than two years, we recovered our confidence and national unity was restored as was parliamentary democracy.

If the Government had betrayed the rakyat it would have been rejected a long time ago. Tun Razak, assisted and advised by the National Consultative Council, led Malaysians out of the depths of trauma into an era of unprecedented growth and development which was enlarged and enhanced during the last 20 years by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Only the BN can guarantee racial harmony. Malaysians should trust the devil they know rather than the angel they don't.

But having said that whether BN continues to dominate Malaysian politics

will depend on how BN leaders respond to changes and needs and aspirations of a better educated Malaysians (of all races), and to their desire for greater participation in Government which shapes their lives and the future of their children.

Will people like YB Muhammad Tulus, Datuk Hishamuddin Tun Hussein and their contemporaries have the stomach to stay on course and lead the nation into a better future for every Malaysian?

Yes. YB Muhammad Tulus and Hishamuddin will perform well even though they are not unique. More importantly they are clean, transparent and family-oriented.

They are not shifty, do not change side nor abandon the oarsman of the sampan once they have arrived safely across the river. At least, not yet, and I hope they never do.

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