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Need to find common ground

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SOME weeks back, when the issue of near negligible number of non-Malays in the civil service, army and police force was raised, a non-Malay senior editor of another English daily was moved to write a commentary on the subject.

In his attempt to enlighten the masses on why the non-Malays, in this case the Chinese, were reluctant to join these services, he also suggested that unattractive remunerations and perks were contributive factors.

A Malay colleague was quite chagrined by that particular argument:

"Does that mean that such unattractive salary and perks are only suitable for the Malays? They are not good enough for the Chinese.

"If the Government wants more non-Malays to join the civil service, the army or the police, a better salary and perks must be offered. If not, leave the task to serve and defend the nation to the Malays."

A strong reaction but a reflection of how sensitive race issues can be if handled with myopia or based on the perception of the community per se.

But could such views be helped as each would generally be able to identify with his or her race first?

Then, if the Government faces the problem of increasing the quota of non-Malays in the civil service which basically means to serve the nation, it has to deal with a situation of a direct contrast when it comes to quota for university intakes.

It is facing the problem of how to deal with the increasing demands from the non-Malays for more places.

While all quarters concerned have their arguments and justifications to the need of how to deal with the incongruity of racial co-existence, the crux of the matter is over the present policies of quota and special privileges to the Bumiputeras.

Actually, it is not only the non-Malays who are uncomfortable with the situation of their children who score good results being denied entry in universities apart from not getting scholarships.

Quite a number of Malays, too, are beginning to be uncomfortable with the circumstances.

About three years ago, Datuk Affifuddin Omar, when he was still a Deputy Minister, related his experience in London to an Umno delegation during a seminar.

He said that after a meeting with Malaysian students, a Malay student and her Chinese colleague confronted him.

Affifuddin said the Malay student questioned why her Chinese friend could not get a scholarship to which his reply was that there was a limited number of students to whom the Government could extend such privilege.

The Malay student whom Affifuddin met is only one of the many.

As the Malays grew to be more sophisticated and exposed to the international arena, the fact that they are the privileged ones in a multi-racial country does prick their sense of fair play and equality.

The Malay middle class and intelligentsia who had acquired above average educational and economic standing tend to be more confident of their existence and quite prepared to have a level playing field to compete with the non-Malays.

However, the number of Malays who had attained such a level of confidence is still small.

The majority are still those who lack confidence in the ability of the Bumiputeras to be able to make it without the Government support system.

And this group also includes those who themselves could be deemed as high achievers. The reasoning on their part is simple: they would not be what they are today if not because of the existence of policies extending the special privileges.

Then there are those who, while dealing with their conscience of the need for equality and to realise a Bangsa Malaysia which does away with the race identification, change their mind when race-related events unfurl.

A retired Malay teacher said:

"When the Malays start wanting to review their stand on education policies, wanting a more Malaysian approach to things, the Chinese will start demanding for more attention on Chinese education, Chinese-trained teachers and Chinese schools.

"It makes one feel that nothing which is Malay or Malaysian is good enough. Only if it is Chinese-based or oriented can it become good."

A superficial assessment of things but such sentiments are very much alive among the Malay masses.

This goes back to why the majority of Malays always felt the need to ensure that the community is dominant in the nation's political power structure. That is, after all, the only fallback the Malays have when all else fails.

However, given the messy Malay political divide of late, the community's political dominance is not providing the comfort zone it used to.

Some of the non-Malays are also opportunistic in view of the circumstances, attempting to use the "weakened" Malay political position to make demands for their community under the guise of national interest.

Realising this, hence the reason why, numerous Malay groups had been quite supportive of the Malay unity talks between Umno and Pas to be held.

Here again, the need for the talks is very clear among the Malay intelligentsia - basically to determine what holds for the community if there is a change in the political leadership.

It is viewed that there is a need for the Malay political players to find a common ground on how to deal with the policies of the special privileges and quota system.

On Friday, when Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad challenged Pas to state its stand on the issue of quota to public universities, it was actually something which could be thrashed out if the Malay unity talks were realised.

Going by previous statements from Pas leaders on the matter, their reply can actually be expected.

It will be that the party would stand by all the constitutional provisions pertaining to the position of the Malays and Bumiputeras.

But it is a very simplistic reaction since the way things had evolved of late, these provisions had, directly or otherwise, been the bone of contention.

It is understandable why Pas would not find the need to involve itself in the present problems as it is not the party in power and that its rule is confined to Kelantan and Terengganu, where the Malay dominance is rarely questioned.

However, if it truly is projecting itself as capable of taking over the nation's rule, it is as much its problems as Umno's and the rest of the Malay existence.

As stated in previous articles, the Malays and Bumiputeras, as the majority community, need to be clear on what they want for themselves.

They have to come to an understanding between them of how they want the

policies on the community to be pursued.

They have to decide whether these policies are still relevant, should they be reviewed, retained, expanded, reduced or repealed altogether.

Once they have thrashed these out, then they can come to a collective understanding of what the principle of the policies should be and how they should be applied.

Having done that, the matter is then taken up to the non-Malays and another session of thrashing out, to be fine-tuned and turned into the blueprint regarding race relations for the nation in the new millennium.

It would be the basis of the nation's rule, regardless of who holds the acme of power.

Of course, it would not please everyone at the end of the day. But wasn't that the situation when the nation's Constitution was drafted and later on adopted?

After all, the basis of the nation's continued existence had been on communal politics and not communalism.

It has also been based on the principles of give-and-take, tolerance and processes of accommodating each other.

It will not be as simple as being said, but surely it is worth a try.

Unless some of these political forces have other revolutionary ideas on how to change the nation's political landscape.

That is another story, or a tall tale rather.