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The old horse does know better

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THE explosion in information technology and K-economy has not been, insofar as we are concerned, accompanied by a similar increase in knowledge. This is particularly true of the Bumiputera, an unfortunate thing. The world has become a global village and its inhabitants interact, but they do not necessarily understand or like each other.

At home, unfortunately, some Malaysians are taught in schools and university to shun other races, and even their co-religionists, by blinkered holier-than-thou teachers unless the co-religionists follow them.

They inculcate and instigate the young with the idea that the majority must dictate. The minority resents it? Too bad. It can quit (hence more and more non-Malay and even Malay children are avoiding national schools). The Islamists work (actually their jihad) on the assumption (belief) that Malaysia will and must become homogenised one day.

I am a Malay (more than what the definition in the Constitution says) and I am alarmed by these people who have fallen prey to the "glorious past". They are ignoring realpolitik, history and judging everything by the criteria of Islamic education and the Islamic civilisation of the past.

The fact that under successive Umno-led governments the Malays have achieved much more in the past 44 years than in centuries under the colonial powers (Portuguese, Dutch, British, Japanese/Thai and British again until 1957) is acknowledged but provides no comfort.

On the contrary, Umno opponents want more: an Islamic theocratic state. And until Umno agrees or they take power (which according to them will be in 2004) they will continue to assault and attack Umno's middle-of-the-road policies.

Once the choice was either Tunku Abdul Rahman's version of Malaysia or Lee Kuan Yew's version of Malaysian Malaysia, which is the euphemism for a backdated Malayan Union.

The Malaysian Chinese, on the other hand, though not all of them, (just like not all Malays yearn for what the Islamists want) pine for a meritorious Malaysia in which they will shine, spectacularly triumph, an understandable desire. Except that Malaysia cannot afford it for the moment because the majority race is still dismally disadvantaged in every conceivable field. The peril is too great.

I personally want a society that not only survives and prospers, but also excels. In pursuit of that dream one must be practical. Neither Malaysian Malaysia nor an Islamic theocratic state will happen anytime soon. I believe Malaysians will temporise between the two and instead back the old workhorse, imperfect though it is.

This is perhaps the status of Malaysian politics today. I could be wrong, of course: Islam is the determining factor of the future unless sane, secular Malaysians and all those who care for Malaysia (with all its weaknesses and strengths) rally behind a middle-of-the-road Umno.

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 who is 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 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 do not shape up they will 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 content 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 eye-opener 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) would 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 in-depth 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 ethnocentric".

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 two-day convention on the same subject organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (ASLI) will take place starring Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah 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 roundtable 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 state-based 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 contract - which is binding on the Bumiputera and the other Malaysians. I shall caution the people and the Government alike about potential 'flashpoints' which must be nipped in the bud.

The fight against poverty must transcend race and religion as also 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 mono-polar 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.

Poverty, inequity, unequal distribution of incomes, marginalisation of the majority (and minority too) of the population and high unemployment and crime rates among the disadvantaged are high.

The number of listed Bumiputera companies on KLSE and their share of market capitalisation are small and getting smaller, I believe.

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 or delusion of the other side of the fence.

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

Upon independence, we faced almost the same threats which today confront us, although 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, they do not feel the whole animal and make wrong conclusions. They are dangerous.

Perhaps, the time has come, as Musa says, 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 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.

In politics anything is possible. People change, some for the better. Many become worse once in power.

Ours is a multi-religious and multi-cultural society. If you think I exaggerate things, so be it. Every achievement starts with a dream and Pas's vision is that generation which follows scrupulously the Quran, the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) or the Hadis and the Syariah jurisprudence.

What Pas lacks is substituted by Islamic idealism, the most potent force of organised religion-politics this country has ever seen. Their imagination has been extended to a probability that had never occurred to them before. An Islamic political paradise on earth beckons.

The battle between moderation and Islamic political obscurantism which began in 1951 (when Pas was formed by dissidents members of Umno's Religious Bureau) is far from finished. It's just the beginning of a real contest for control of the destiny of the nation.

Any lack of support from the middle-ground would impede if not stall the forces of moderation.

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