

04/09/2001

Time for moderates to stand up for themselves

Abdullah Ahmad

LIFE for Malays and other Bumiputeras has changed and is changing only gradually except, predictably, in politics. The other Malaysians have transformed themselves and are changing radically. Hindsight tends to mellow my views on what has happened to cause the changes taking place. I am, of course, concerned about the new undercurrents of racial and religious intolerance which are to the detriment of everyone including the Muslims.

Though Islamic militancy and extremism will affect the non-Muslims more than others, I sense there is a genuine desire by the latter to see Malaysia succeed and their loyalty to a just and strong Malaysia generally remains undivided.

Just as Merdeka dominated the last 44 years, I believe that it will be Merdeka and the freedom of individual rights that will be the core issues which will decide who dominates Malaysian politics, a potentially coercive government run by Islamic clerics or any other group, or the present moderate Government. I have great confidence the Barisan Nasional (BN) will triumph. Still, one can't be complacent about it.

Malaysia was and is a happy, prosperous and peaceful nation. The people live in harmony. Malaysians work together, play together, attend each other's festivities and live side by side. There were no signs of overt religious extremism and intolerance until recently. Now, most Malaysians feel that the threat of Islamic militancy and extremism is real, and they want the Government to act firmly against the trend. Indeed, to extinguish it sooner than later.

Though there are people who have become disenchanted with the Government, the last thing they want is to be imperilled by the deadly menace.

At least, they know the Government, whatever they may think of it, doesn't tell them what to wear, what to read, what to think, or what movies and TV programmes to watch.

In an Islamic theocratic state, even if it can't run the administration properly, the mullahs will dictate what you can and can't do culturally.

If the people are indifferent and resent the Government which warns them of the danger, we are lost, and we deserve to be.

I would like to see a strong multi-racial and multi-religious Malaysia and a strong BN that puts freedom with responsibility first.

Religious freedom, freedom to run a business and make money with as little government interference as possible. People who cower in their homes after dark, and worse, in daytime behind locked doors, are not free!

I must be honest and state this categorically. A government that stands for opportunity for its people must also make sure that criminals (foreign or domestic) do not have free rein to terrorise the law-abiding or, verily, snatch handbags of local women and tourists. Freedom from fear and want must be the cornerstone of this nation.

That notwithstanding, Malaysia may well receive more than 11 million tourists by the year-end, an all-time record. Kuala Lumpur is relatively a very safe place but we were better before, though there were many tourists.

If law and order is strengthened, the tourists will just pour in and I shall not be surprised if the arrivals reach 13 million by the end of 2002.

Malaysian history has produced four Prime Ministers. Every PM - from Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Razak, Tun Hussein Onn to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - was shaped by colonialism, Japanese Occupation, the separation of Singapore and the tragic May 13 1969 race riots.

The trauma and intensity of the various periods, the latter in particular, have defined much of Malaysian social, economic and political life up to now.

Malaysian patriotism is taking deep roots and I think it will become ingrained in all Malaysians by the year 2020, maybe even earlier.

Dr Mahathir will be the last PM to have any links with the pre-Second World War period. Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, when he takes over, is a child of Merdeka.

By the Sixties, the same emotional patriotic quality that had united all races to achieve Merdeka united most of them to form Malaysia and against Indonesia, which vowed to stop the formation of "greater Malaya".

The unifying theme of Malaysia did not produce a powerful enough electoral force to save the Tunku in the 1969 general election and within 16 months, he handed over power to Tun Razak.

Tun Razak formed a strong political platform in 1974, uniting all parties (except DAP) in the BN which constituted a powerful electoral machine for the next 27 years. It is expected to go on doing so for the foreseeable future.

Tun Razak managed what not even Tunku could achieve: he seduced conservative Islamic "evangelicals" to be part of the BN Government at all levels. Development, less politicking, and also belief in a strong Malaysia kept Umno and Pas pulling in harness.

Two years after Tun Razak's premature and tragic death, Pas pulled out of the Government and joined the Opposition.

I was then in solitary confinement at the Kamunting Detention Centre. I was variously told then and later on that it was a contentious coalition under Tun Razak's successor, the then Datuk Hussein Onn.

Hussein survived for five years (1976-1981) and won the 1978 election easily, helped enormously by a flourishing economy and a weak and disparate Opposition.

Dr Mahathir changed and is changing the Malaysian political landscape beyond recognition after two decades in power. If there were orientation or "ideological" differences between Tun Razak and Dr Mahathir's early years, especially, I could find them only with a magnifying glass.

Two strong factions in Umno emerged after Dr Mahathir became Prime Minister - the Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah group and Dr Mahathir's faction. Tan Sri Musa Hitam, Dr Mahathir's deputy in government and party, defected, and he and Tengku Razaleigh nearly defeated Dr Mahathir in 1987.

Dr Mahathir's record is impressive but there were and are issues, as he has himself admitted, that could have been handled better (affirmative action, for one). I believe the other is the education policy.

Just as many Malaysians are scared of Pas' Islamic theocratic State's cultural control and religious coercion, and the clerics telling people what they should do; many are also worried by the spectre of "too much political correctness" that seems to have settled over so much of our national and intellectual discourse.

I strongly believe that, like me, most middle and upper-middle class Malaysians, when faced with the prospect of the intolerant mullahs and clerics will tell them to go stuff it.

I do contend that an overwhelming majority of Malaysians of all races are too smart and too practical to succumb or be seduced to religious and racial extremism and communalism. Let's see what happens during the Sarawak state election later in the month.

Malaysia was founded as an inclusive nation that stood and stands up for everyone. No party, however righteous it claims to be, or pre-ordained to rule, has the right to slam the door in the face of other Malaysians.

They must be protected so that they can live without the fear of religious and cultural assault.

They can and must rightfully rebel at any party or government which tells them that what is wrong is right, and that which is right is wrong.

We need to keep the door and our minds open in this 21st century: We must fight for freedom, economic and social opportunity, and meritocracy to build a solid majority party for the next general election and beyond.

The forces of moderation must be galvanised to counter Islamic militancy and extremism. The various races must be prepared and steadied for the new political battle.

All must assist to break social and political barriers among the races in order together to stand up against those who want to turn the clock back.

(END)