

04/01/2001

True spirit of Muslim brotherhood

Harun Hashim

AS the month of Ramadan came to a close at the end of last year, it was a most welcome sight to witness Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed shaking hands in public with Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor.

Both were smiling and exchanging pleasantries in the true spirit of Muslim brotherhood when attending the breaking of the fast at the Masjid Al-Bukhary in Alor Star.

The two Malay leaders have shown by example that Muslims can be civil to one and another in spite of political differences, an example which should be emulated at all levels of society right down to the kampungs.

Indeed Malaysians of all races get on famously with one another in the course of their daily lives, cultivating a culture of friendliness amply demonstrated at work, at play and during festive occasions.

For the last 200 years, Malaysia has been the melting pot of diverse cultures and religions of many races, slowly but surely evolving a culture that is becoming distinctly Malaysian.

Perhaps the most distinguishing part of being Malaysian is our cuisine with the delightful mixture of original Malay, Chinese, Indian, Middle East and Western dishes. As a result, our eating habits have changed. The buffet spread in most hotels says it all.

For many years now we are fortunate in not having racial strife or religious conflicts between the many ethnic groups. There is peace and harmony in the country.

Lately, however, Malay unity has become a subject of serious concern in some quarters. At stake is the political power of the Malays and by extension the political stability of the country to sustain economic and social development. The truth of the matter is that the Malays constitute only about 60 per cent of the population and if the community is divided to the extent that it does not have the racial majority to continue to exercise dominant political power, it will disrupt the existing political power-sharing arrangements with perhaps disastrous results to the country as a whole.

The Malays first faced the threat of political extinction in their own homeland when the British imposed the Malayan Union Constitution.

The calamity brought together all the separate and parochial Malay organisations in the country for the first time in the history of the Malays.

They formed Umno in 1946 as a national organisation for all of the Malays in Malaya with the battle cry of *Hidup Melayu*.

Their solidarity, and strong opposition to the Malayan Union Constitution, finally forced the British to abandon the proposal.

The Malay Rulers and the British eventually entered into the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948 which not only restored the sovereignty of the Malay Rulers but that of the Malays as well.

Umno, MCA and the MIC formed the Alliance Party to contest the general election of 1955.

The Umno-dominated Alliance won 51 of the 52 seats contested. The remaining seat was won by Pas. The convincing election victory led to independence in 1957.

Apart from the saving of the sovereignty of the Malay Rulers and the protection of aboriginal peoples, the Federal Constitution is based on the

social contract forged between the Malay, Chinese and Indian leaders to serve the country and its people for years to come.

In 1951, a splinter group of Umno formed Pas. More due to infighting within Umno, Pas captured the State Governments of Kelantan and Trengganu in the 1959 general election.

That did not worry Umno too much then because the Malays were solidly behind Umno in the rest of the country.

Indeed Umno regained power in the two States subsequently.

In the 1969 general election, the Malays discovered to their dismay that they had lost political power.

To reduce racial conflict, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein formed the Barisan Nasional principally bringing in the Chinese-based Parti Gerakan and the Malay-based Pas. Later, the leadership of Pas changed and Pas left the BN.

Pas has been entrenched in Kelantan for more than a decade. In the 1999 general election, Pas captured Trengganu after more than 35 years of Umno rule. It also made significant inroads into long held Umno territory in the other States.

The Malays are now divided politically. Umno is taking the initiative to reunite the Malays.

Significantly, Malay-based political parties in opposition to Umno are all splinter groups of Umno: Pas in 1951, Semangat 46 in the 1980s (since dissolved) and Keadilan in the 1990s.

Reunification would not be a difficult exercise if it were only a case of the return of prodigal sons to Umno as was the case with Semangat 46.

All Malays are Muslims. Practically all members of Pas are Malays. In calling for Malay unity the task is to reconcile being Malay or Muslim first.

That is the Malay dilemma today.

(END)