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Remaking the Malaysian nation

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MY wife is very annoyed with me. She says I work too hard. In whatever I do, I try to do well. It is writing (and talking) that I most enjoy, and this she cannot understand.

For the first dozen years of Independence, I was a bachelor. I was present, a witness, at its creation 45 years ago and have never looked back. I plead with her that I have to concentrate on recording for posterity what I think is happening, and ought to be occurring, in our country.

You cannot but know that we live in a period of uncertainty. The arrogance of power is pervasive. The users wish all their enemies would crumble away into the dust or change their governments into clients. Remember the examples of our forefathers who fought for Merdeka. Few of their names are inscribed in the history books. We are still 18 years away from becoming a developed nation. We have no time to waste. We ought to take the latest and the best that the West can offer and which we can learn.

Malaysians must make greater efforts and accept more sacrifices. This is our country. The existence of our nation is being threatened, and we must fight to preserve it. It is a joint responsibility.

People of the Merdeka generation, myself included, were obsessed with building a nation. Young Malaysians, as with unoppressed and self-confident young people everywhere, are starting to be obsessed about themselves.

If they eventually heed John F. Kennedy's call to "ask not what the country can do for you, but what you can do for your country", then Malaysia will be on a roll. I can then say that we of the older generation have succeeded, perhaps even beyond what we dared to hope.

At first, we only hoped to live and let live. All the big ex-colonial countries had far grander ambitions. At the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in 1955, the Nehrus, Titos, Sukarnos, Nassers and Nkrumahs spoke as if they had the world at their feet. But few have come as far as we have. I can barely count them in one hand.

Perhaps we did better because our aims were more modest, and our leaders far more practical. Before Independence, and between it and the formation of Malaysia, we had few things working for us. We had to contend with the Communist threat and the Indonesian Confrontation. In Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore, the new federation had a splintered population in which no single race was in a majority. There was simply not enough ground for live and let live.

Until the amputation of Singapore in 1965 and the May 13, 1969 incident shifted the political demographics in favour of consensus, Malaysia was a disaster waiting to happen.

It did not, but we've had many close calls. To stand any chance at all, we had to secure and manage unity - firmly if need be. Each of us had to learn to make do with less than we felt we deserved. We had to get used to the idea that no single race could have it all. Who lives if Malaysia perishes?

We had to intertwine political stability and economic growth. And we often had to keep our mouths shut and stow our raw politics in cold storage to live in peace and goodwill with one another.

We did all this for the cause of Malaysia. In 45 years, the population

has more than tripled, per capita income has risen 13-fold, the poverty rate has been cut from 80 per cent to less than seven and Malaysia has never been more stable and prosperous, despite continuing racial suspicion.

Tell me which other developing nation has done as well? If, after all we've gained, any Malaysian now feels that his sacrifice has been too onerous, then he doesn't deserve to be here. Let him leave.

In building the nation, unity is everything. States have failed and will fail without it. Our diversity, of which we are so proud, will mean nothing if we do not have unity in the nucleus of our being. The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, never tires of repeating over and over again, how vital it is for our country.

For our people, unity must be a mantra and a prayer. We should recite it every time we risk taking an untested position on sensitive matters such as security, education and language.

Malaysian democracy can and must be tolerant of differences of opinion, but only to the extent that it fosters consultation and compromise, and thereby aids consensus. In 45 years, that tolerance has increased. Certainly, as the middle ground broadens, so does the latitude for debate and discussion.

But be warned. Our democracy must serve to unite, not divide us. In the cause of Malaysia, we should not be embarrassed by laws such as the Internal Security Act. We must never be glad to use it. Indeed, it was abused against me and a few friends in 1976 for no reason other than we could not support the ambitions of some unpopular politicians.

But as long as there are Malaysians who forsake unity and who subvert and terrorise, we should possess every means to protect what we've built.

It was regrettable that the ISA had to be whispered around during the recent furore over the issue of introducing English subjects in schools. But there are undeniably chauvinists among us, and we continue to put up with them in the generosity of our democracy and the undiminished hope that they will eventually see good sense.

These people have not grown up since Merdeka. They cannot and don't want to concur with the simple truth that we have enough constitutional protections to guard our multi-culturalism without their help.

The English debate is being hijacked by the narrowest vested interests: the educationists and teachers, the so-called "intellectuals" and writers and the race-based demagogue politicians. They are mono-cultural monomaniacs, focused on the sliver of Malaysia they call their own, instead of the synergistic whole.

What about the silent majority? I think they are sensible, moderate, inclusive and are holding fast to the middle ground. They are far more representative of the Malaysian rainbow than the monochrome extremists, and should speak up for it.

Only by loudly protecting, and securely managing, our unity can we go on to the next phase of the Malaysia project - managing diversity. The Malaysian majority know that their children's prospects in a globalising and increasingly competitive world will be impaired by a retreat into cultural exclusiveness.

If we have a deep-rooted unity, we can propose that Malaysian multi-racialism should be about multi-lingualism in the widest sense of the term. Malaysians should not then be mono-lingual, bilingual, or even trilingual. They should know four languages and be proud of it!

Unity in diversity could then be measured in our openness to choice, in a multiplicity of solutions rather than short-order half-measures designed to please opposites. The English language issue would not be a problem at all.

If vested interests were not so intent on having things their way, we could have a partial reversion to the old British system, in which there were four types of schools, teaching in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. Dr Mahathir went to an English school, and he did not become less Malay because of it. Neither did I.

Some of these established schools - Penang Free School, Victoria Institution, English College, Sultan Abdul Hamid College, the Malay College, Anderson and Clifford Schools, King George V, St. John's, St. Michael's and St. Paul's Institutions and the Convent schools - could be reconverted to teach again in English, with Bahasa Malaysia and Malaysian literature as compulsory subjects.

Muslims should be compelled to take Islamic studies. And non-Malays could opt for an additional subject in their mother tongue. That degree of openness belongs to the young, who are unburdened by the past and hopeful of the future. As long as our moderates stay lulled and permit the extremists to take the public podium on their behalf, our diversity can only be taken at face value.

Even so, that value is great. Before our linguistic neo-fascists go too far, let me remind them that there are dozens of UN-recognised dialects across the country. Let not the Chinese or Indians, or even the Malays, get too big for their boots, for there are Iban, Kadazandusun, Kelabit and Murut among many minorities that we as a united nation are beholden to protect.

Our tragedy today is a general and universal fear long perpetrated by the language and racial bigots that we cannot seem to face bravely once and for all: Them or us; bigots or moderates? Vocal minority or silent majority? We must do what needs to be done: the harmonisation of the new and the familiar, with a balance between novelty and synthesis.

You may, indeed you must, help to integrate a Malaysia that appears to be in danger. The political pendulum, in some areas, has swung dangerously far from the median, and you must help to restore it to the vital centre of its arc.