

08/08/2002

Back to school to forge a truly Malaysian nation

Harun Hashim

THE growing polarisation of the different races in Malaysia, as stated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the recent MCA General Assembly, is of grave concern to all right-thinking Malaysians.

The trend is most alarming because it is discernible among the younger generation cultivated, in part, by the increasing tendency of non-Malay parents to send their children to vernacular schools.

The trend has since manifested in recent years by the obvious spectacle of university students on campus segregating themselves by racial groups.

This is a most unhealthy and worrying social development. We have been priding ourselves that despite of being a multiracial and multi-religious country we are peaceful and prosperous.

Like a bolt from the blue we discover that we have put the clock back by half a century. During the colonial period, the British adopted a policy of divide and rule.

The majority of the Malays were in the rural areas. They were padi farmers, orchard growers and fishermen.

Their children were given elementary education in government Malay schools for four years and a fifth year if the student wanted to be a Malay school teacher.

The Chinese generally were urban dwellers and minded their own business in the retail trade. They had their own Chinese schools for the children who joined the family business when they left school.

The Indians mostly lived and worked on foreign-owned plantations. The children went to Tamil schools maintained by the community for an elementary education and took over the jobs of their parents in the estate. A few lived in the urban areas engaged in petty trade.

In the State capitals, the British built English schools which were open to all races. The schools provided an English education for 11 years leading to the Cambridge School Certificate examination. Only those who attended government English schools qualified to enter government service.

The Malays in the urban areas were mostly government servants. Their children attended English schools and mixed freely with Chinese and Indian classmates, and continued to do so after leaving school. A few school-leavers went overseas, mostly to the UK to become lawyers, doctors and engineers.

That was the picture before the Second World War. The British returned to Malaya after the Japanese surrendered and imposed the Malayan Union Constitution in 1946. The Malays united under Umno to protest against this imposition which the British finally abandoned, resulting in the Federation of Malaya Agreement of 1948.

Umno then began to agitate for self-government. The British held the view that we would not be able to function as a nation because of the racial divide.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, as President of Umno, decided to prove otherwise. He got the MCA and the MIC to stand for the Kuala Lumpur Municipal Election as a team with Umno in 1952. They won handsomely.

The Tunku then formed the Alliance Party consisting of Umno, MCA and the MIC to contest the Federal Legislative Council election in 1955. The Alliance captured 51 of 52 seats at stake which proved to the British that Malaysians could work together to found a nation.

Encouraged by the success, the Alliance Party decided to ask for full

independence which it gained in 1957.

The fact that the leaders of the three communities could work together for a common cause put paid to the British policy of divide and rule in order to maintain their rule.

More importantly, the leaders were able to work together because they all attended English schools where students of all races studied and played together regardless of racial differences.

On attaining Independence, the Government set about a truly Malayan nation. It merged the English and Malay schools into national schools open to all races.

More such schools were built all over the country, giving opportunities to children in the rural areas to obtain secondary education. It was really a master plan providing equal opportunities to all without regard to race or religion.

The students from national schools went on to enter the newly established University of Malaya which was noted for its multi-racial character.

The graduates from this university are largely responsible for the successful implementation of the Government's Five-Year Development Plans which the people enjoy today.

What then has gone wrong? Indeed, under the Tun Abdul Razak Education Report, the Chinese and Tamil schools would have been extinct with the passage of time.

There can be no doubt that the process of nation-building is best achieved with a single education system. The US is a good example of such a policy. We too got there with the Sekolah Kebangsaan, almost.

The Government and every right-thinking Malaysian should go back to the drawing board to forge a truly Malaysian nation. There is no room for extremists and chauvinists in our education policy.