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Time to rejoice with gratitude and pride

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A true patriot is the fellow who gets a parking ticket and rejoices that the system works. - Bill Vaughn

ARE you patriotic? I asked a few activist friends on the eve of National Day, just before I started on this column. We were discussing Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's message on how Malaysians should be more patriotic.

I thought it would be interesting to do some stocktaking of our sense of patriotism. Our nation is 45 years old now; we cannot plead national "infancy" or ignorance as excuses for being apathetic.

After independence, a Malaysian nation came into existence in the political and geographical sense, but at the psychological level there are so many different expressed and unexpressed views.

Anyway, these friends of mine have always been challenging the Government's views on various issues because they believe that critical thinking is in accord with patriotism. Maybe they are right.

Criticism has been the initiative behind the most fundamentally progressive changes within our Government. Perhaps true patriotism is about the questioning of policies and not just blind endorsement. If we exercise the right to dissent, it's a patriotic act.

Someone quoted Malcolm X: You are not supposed to be blind with patriotism that you cannot face reality.

I received amazingly eloquent correspondences from critics. And yet each and every message I received convinces me that the heart and soul of Malaysia is alive and well in these critics.

Perhaps they hear a different tune but let them follow their tune however unsynchronised with our national tune. Ultimately, if the intent is pure, we will all rally around, no matter what our differences.

Just the same, what I need to know is this: just as we are so eager to express our criticisms, can we equally be enthusiastic about expressing our gratitude? But sadly, the people who are so outspoken about their dissatisfaction about the Government are strangely silent about voicing their gratitude for what the Government has done for the nation.

So many have questioned my pro-Government sentiments in this column. My reasons are simple. I love Malaysia. I love Malaysians. This is my country and I know none other. Besides as you become a mother, there is more meaning in gratitude than in criticisms.

The full gratitude for the stability and peace we enjoy can be felt as we watch the nation marching towards our 46th milestone with drums, helicopters and fireworks. The full appreciation of peace and harmony in the country can be felt by seeing our children march together as Malaysians.

Furthermore, we have so much to be proud of as we hoist our tallest flag to a gallant position overlooking a stable nation that is scaling new heights of economic growth and international recognition.

We have passed through an eventful period, growing out of dependence on tin and rubber and have become an industrialised and a fast-developing nation.

With the prudent policies of Dr Mahathir, even the global recession of the mid-80s did little damage to our economic growth, productivity, diversity and wealth. We have earned the title of the Malaysian Miracle. And we celebrate this on Aug 31 every year. A day of patriotism and pride.

This is a special day that we celebrate together for having shared a common past, for enjoying the present and for looking forward to the future together.

Coming back to the question of what is patriotism. It is not a frenzied burst of emotion. It is a collective responsibility towards our nation. It is the tranquil, steady dedication of a lifetime.

Let us not wait for external disasters or a war to explore our patriotic instincts. Exhibiting patriotism in times of national crisis is by no means a novel reaction. I must admit, unfortunately, it is in the name of patriotism that so many wars have been fought.

To me patriotism does not merely indicate morals or ethics. It means a deep-rooted love for one's country. It relates to a sense of belonging to the country we were born in.

The greatest asset of any nation is the spirit of its people and the greatest danger that can happen is when this spirit is broken. And national progress is determined by the sum of this individual spirit and energy.

National pride should be inculcated in schools, children should understand what the national anthem is all about. They should sing it with an enthusiasm, not monotonously as a routine.

The present day is so different from the Malaya of 1957. No doubt we still have a long way to go to strengthen and articulate our national vision. We are a group of people of individual cultures, religions and backgrounds and it may be difficult to bring us together as one culture.

So far there has been an acknowledgement of each person's individuality. And that is why we lead harmonious lives.

We have a common history and role in nation-building. This is our country, our Malaysia. And patriotism should spring from that deep sense of belonging.