

02/09/2002

Don't sweat the small stuff

IN his National Day message to the nation, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad asked Malaysians to make a "small sacrifice" for the sake of racial peace and harmony. It would seem sacrifices of almost any magnitude would be worth making for that cherished Malaysian ideal, but what Dr Mahathir said inverts the equation and allows us to recognise the devil in the details: the terrible pettiness that undermines our efforts to construct the Malaysia all of us want at heart.

While we focus on the endless dramas of party politics, we lose sight of the fact that the entire system exists in order to create and operate the machinery of governance; to get things done that will move this country towards the goals agreed by a notional two-thirds majority of its people.

Yet, almost invariably, every initiative floated on the sea of public opinion swiftly founders on cultural anxiety and the political conflicts that both feed and are fed by it. From multiracial education and the use of English, to the role of religion in national life, all the way down to resource and infrastructural management it is almost impossible to name a factor of national governance that is not vulnerable to "the race card".

Much of this is due to the ingrained race-based nature of our party politics, wherein even the avowedly aracial parties can describe their memberships in ethnic percentages. Almost any expression of opinion or statement of position on any issue is ineluctably filtered through a particular screen of race, be it in upholding privileges or preempting perceived threats.

The Barisan Nasional model was meant to be a forum for the settlement of such issues and differences, not their primary showcase. The people who vote their Government into power should not compel their elected representatives to advance only their narrowest and most petty-minded concerns. And those who oppose the Government should seek to compel both it and their own parliamentarians to higher standards, not lower.

What is Malaysian is manifest. That it is not perceived or expressed clearly enough may be due to the incessant din of small minds with disproportionately loud voices fretting over anything and everything that isn't.