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Let's be colour blind for our children's sake

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"The university students are now keeping to their own race, they don't live together in the same dormitory, they sit apart in the lecture theatres, in the playing fields and during co-curricular activities." IN 10 days' time, Malaysia will be celebrating its birthday as a country that has bloomed within a climate of diversified values and culture. Forty five years ago, our forefathers were brimming with nationalism on that Aug 31 morning as they raised OUR flag, with a common identity and pride.

Malaya then was a small agrarian society. But over the years, we have grown in strength and today, the whole world marvels at our progress, achievement and economic stability.

However, the irony is that instead of getting closer, the grandchildren of our independence-day nationalists are segregating into different races.

The Malayan culture, whose innate unity even the astute British gave in to, is being slowly eroded. And today slowly but surely, the soul of the Malaysian identity and spirit is burying itself as we disintegrate ourselves as Malays, Chinese, Indians and others.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been reiterating and reinforcing racial solidarity and integration for national unity and progress amidst various conflicts.

Last week, he again alerted us that the relations between students of different races were deteriorating. This, he said, was an unhealthy situation and was dangerous to the country's future.

Sadly, his efforts to improve race relations on the campus has been eroded by various parties with vested interest.

This time around, Dr Mahathir recommended multiracial clubs on campus, which would conduct courses on the customs, taboos and sensitivities of each race.

The clubs will enable students of different races to mingle socially, in sporting activities and educational outings within the country or abroad.

How deeply must the Prime Minister yearn for this magic of unity so that we can go down in history as a united race? How disturbing must it be to come up with a far-sighted vision when the beneficiaries do not understand its far-reaching consequences?

Being educated in a local university, I know the intensity of racial segregation and how such clubs, if set up with the right motives, would indeed break the monotony of race segregation.

As a multiracial country, there is a price to pay if there is segregation. As a child, I grew up in a Malay neighbourhood and my best friends were Malays. I went to an English-medium school, where my close friends were Chinese or Malays.

But the day I set foot in university, it was a culture shock as I was made ultra-conscious of being an Indian and even further segregated according to my sub-ethnic group. I must admit that this did give me a sense of belonging and perhaps even strengthen my cultural identity. And why not, I used to think everyone else is doing the same thing too.

But today it has become apparent that there is a passionate quest for a separate identity, which may further isolate Malaysians from each other.

I understand that the bitterness and anger of not being recognised are painful lessons of everyday life. But to further isolate ourselves in the quest of that identity will not move our greater agenda of being Malaysians.

Currently, in the wake of highly publicised debates on the need of a cultural identity, I believe there is also a parallel need for colour blindness in recruiting students as a necessary means of preventing the university's segregation.

Unfortunately, no country in the world has a colour-blind alternative - one that will not take race, national origin, ethnicity to justify or redress historical injustices.

Most frequently, it is not the strategy or policy that is at fault, but society which fails to implement it successfully. It fails because it does not have the right values and the right attitudes. In such a case, introducing new plans and approaches is not going to do any good. They will all fail again.

Besides, Governments can change. People in the Government as well as laws and policies too can change. So it is not only with various Governments that racial fundamentalism sets in.

It begins at home. It begins in school. It begins from within.

But what does not change is the fundamental belief that we would progress in leaps and bounds if we can love each other as one race - If only we can shed our man-made differences and speak the language of unity.

On Aug 31, we will celebrate our independence.

Let's work on a national identity for the future of the country, the future of our children and our children's children.

Perhaps a good place to start would be to restore in all of us the dignity that the country belongs to us.

Each and everyone of us should feel that we are Malaysians and that we belong to this country, just as the country belongs to us.

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