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Merdeka, patriotism and a younger generation born amid success

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SHOUTS of Merdeka in the past decade, says a pensioner, have been soulless.

"Forget the early days of independence when emotions overflowed on Merdeka day. Even in the 1970s and through the 1980s, Malaysians were still very emotional when National Day was celebrated.

"I fear when the present batch of leaders who were part of the independence struggle pass the mantle, new and younger leaders may just take the day as just another national legacy that has to be celebrated and not a day they want to celebrate," the pensioner broods.

He was obviously being nostalgic and suffering from the syndrome "what does the young people know about what we had to go through".

But the pensioner is not wrong in his assessment either.

The present generation, positioning itself as a future leader in the various fields the nation offers, does not have as much emotional baggage as its elders.

None experienced the indignity of having to serve British colonial masters, being ill-treated by the Japanese marauders, or having to live in fear of communist terrorism.

They are a generation born amid success.

While the pensioner and those from his generation may lament the lack of patriotism among the younger generation, they should actually realise that a lot of it is their own doing.

After achieving independence, that generation managed to secure, defend and retain Merdeka for their children and grandchildren to reap.

With that, the nation grew, albeit with hiccups, to be prosperous, respectable and confident.

Furthermore, the nation did not grow by chance or merely by depending on its natural resources.

It grew from well thought-out ideas.

From Tunku Abdul Rahman to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, each leader was responsible in coming up with visions which defined the nation at every turn of its life.

Take this excerpt from the Tunku's speech at the inaugural Malayan Federal Legislative Council meeting on Aug 31, 1955 which convinced the British colonialists that Merdeka must be granted as scheduled:

"If it is delayed beyond this period, you will help spread Communism, since Communism thrives and flourishes on colonialism. It will be a very sorry day indeed, not only for us here in Malaya but also for the people of England, if the Communists ever get a foothold in this country. The Communists have already infiltrated rubber estates, mines, towns, villages and what is even worse, our schools. Unless this infiltration can be checked in time, the Communists will consolidate their position and constitute a real menace to Malayan peace and to the peace of the world."

There was no turning back after that. Malaya got its independence two years later, engaged in a protracted battle with the communists, and the rest is history.

A New Straits Times reader Idrus Abu Bakar wrote in and shared a quote from the Tunku in 1957:

"We promise to build houses instead of barracks, provide food instead of rations and clothing instead of uniforms."

That promise seems well fulfilled today and the Tunku's successor Tun

Abdul Razak Hussein envisaged this in his speech to move for the adoption of the First Malaysia Plan 1965-70 in Parliament on Dec 15, 1965. An excerpt:

"I ask this House to compare the memory of the days of under-development before Merdeka and the difference between our country as it was 10 years ago and as it stands now today as a prosperous nation to which all of us are proud to belong."

Those were trying times and much as Malaya and then Malaysia moved on to chart one success after another, the failure which seems to elude the nation is unity and the 1969 racial riots remains a black mark on its record.

Tun Hussein Onn who succeeded Razak was very clear about it. When opening the Umno Youth and Wanita general assembly on June 20, 1975, he said:

"Our nation is heterogeneous or multi-racial and with many beliefs. It is a fact that must be accepted and cannot be avoided."

It was probably easier then for the generation of Tunku, Razak and Hussein to emphasise the need for unity as the citizenry then were witness to the horrors of racial conflict. But the racial baggage has persisted and continues to haunt the nation even until today.

Dr Mahathir spoke of the creation of Bangsa Malaysia when he explained his Vision 2020 at the inaugural National Trade Council on Feb 28, 1991, urging the nation to remain focused on achieving the vision:

"Put aside everything else, do not raise trivial matters which will not determine our future. We must think beyond, not only for today, tomorrow or another year. We must think about 30 years from now, for our grandchildren, the future generation so that they will not be humiliated as we were humiliated by others. We do not want to be humiliated by anyone. We want to be a nation who can stand tall and be respected by the rest of the world."

Absorbing all these should help the young generation to always reflect on the struggle of independence by the leaders of yore.

But the patriachs should not feel too disappointed with the younger generation if they seem less patriotic.

In fact, it was the ability of the older generation to shape the nation well that enabled their young ones to achieve success with little effort.

If the youth too had to struggle to move forward, probably, their sense of patriotism and appreciation of the struggle of the older generation would have been more apparent.

In their suffering, their patriotism may even be eschewed, instead of carrying the nation's flags, they burn the flags of others. But that, hopefully, is not the case with young Malaysians. Merdeka then was truly a tribute worthy of the nation.