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Merdeka a time for Malaysians to count their blessings

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ALAS, I am away during this Merdeka. I am in Johannesburg on assignment and, therefore, unable to join the annual parade and sing the songs of Merdeka.

I would have preferred to be in Johor Baru at least, to join my friends at the annual Bugfest carnival and, if lucky, attend a wedding of a friend's niece.

But work is work, and I must be focused. Merdeka holds a very special meaning for me, as I am sure it does for all of you. I have taken part in national parades before, as a schoolboy and later as a working adult. The parades have never failed to lift my spirits, never ...

When not at the Dataran Merdeka, I would be watching the live telecast of the parades on television, and still get my spirits lifted, though not quite the same way as a participant. I missed yesterday's parade, and this has cast a melancholy spell over me.

I recall a zen poem by Ryokan, a well-known Japanese hermit-monk, who endeared himself to his people in the middle and late 1700. His name is a combination of two words - ryo which means good; and kan which signifies generosity and large-heartedness. The poem reads:

"I sit quietly, listening to the falling leaves,
A lonely hut, a life of renunciation.

The past has faded, things are no longer remembered,
My sleeve is wet with tears."

This Merdeka celebration, I can't but feel a sense of anxiety, the degree of which is far greater than in previous years. The departure next October of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister, the racial polarisation that is increasingly apparent particularly among students in institutions of higher learning, the seemingly endless politicking, the unabated use of religion as a political tool, the endless complaints against certain sections of the civil service less dedicated to their work but more devoted to self-enrichment, and the despair of a society suffering from the malaise associated with a wealthy economy - all these are food for thought as we soak in the Merdeka spirit.

No wonder some of our forefathers are red-eyed with tears. Having sacrificed their best years, and some their lives, they have the right to expect that we are getting along nicely. After four and a half decades of independence and as we take stock of what we have, we ought to count our blessings.

Indeed, as a nation still on a learning curve in some areas, we have done remarkably well. But we can be our own worst enemies if we are not careful, which is why some of our leaders should have better control of their tongue lest they utter words that can lead to remorse and national mourning. We ought to settle our differences in a spirit of musyawarah, and not let emotions get the better of our collective struggle. Be focused, be brave, be strong.

Our biggest asset could be our solidarity, which, if not properly nurtured, can crumble and cause our downfall.

This is what Daisaku Ikeda, one of today's most active Buddhist leaders, says about solidarity:

"Solidarity of the common people to preserve the dignity of life
Solidarity of blood and tears that fights off every form of oppression
Solidarity of hearts built out of idealism and good faith

True wheels of mankind

Though we face the criticisms of prejudice and ignorance

We stand tall in our pride."

Our struggle, after 45 years of Merdeka, cannot be based on narrow political interests; selfish, individualistic wealth creation; uncaring social obligations; and counter-productive nationalistic tendencies. We have a lot of work ahead, meaning we cannot allow ourselves to be distracted from our tasks.

Our future lies with the young, our children and our children's children. The late Usman Awang, poet extraordinaire, in one of his golden verses said:

"Anakku dan anak-anak kita semua

Jangan dilukai hati mereka dengan senjata,

Biar di wajah dan hatinya cinta berbunga,

Dunia yang damai, hidup yang sejahtera."

All it means is that we should create a conducive environment for our children to grow up in without prejudice of each other's ethnic, cultural and religious differences; that we not poison their minds and hearts with feelings of hatred and animosity; that we sincerely work to instil in them a sense of wellness, mutual love and respect, so that we can all prosper and live happily.