

08/09/2002

Multi-cultural diversity of country will not be compromised, says Najib

Carolyn Hong

PANGKOR, Sat. - No one will be allowed to change the multi-cultural diversity that is Malaysia's strength even if the country may never achieve unity in the strict sense of the word, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said.

He said the country always bore the concept of unity in mind and that was far more significant than having a false sense of unity and pretending that everything was fine.

"This is Malaysia. As someone once said, there are no elements so diverse that they cannot be joined in the heart of a man," he said in his keynote address at the inaugural Pangkor Retreat being attended by eminent persons from here and abroad to search for answers to the peace process.

The weekend retreat, or Asian Global Leadership Forum, is being held at the Pangkor Laut Resort. It is organised by Forbes Inc, YTL Corporation Berhad, CNBC and Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute.

Najib said as society became more sophisticated, the Government was faced with rising expectations and greater demands.

"If we could get away with doing so much or so little previously, we better think twice today, as the demands will dictate that you do much more," he said.

In his address titled "Malaysia: Building a Modern and Stable Multiracial Nation," Najib outlined several principles which he felt had been Malaysia's guiding principle and philosophy.

He picked out education as a key, noting that Malaysia had walked a tightrope to balance national aspirations with the rights of various ethnic groups to their cultural heritage.

He said it was not a contradiction to allow different types of schools to exist while trying to achieve unity, rather, it was consistent with Malaysia's way of achieving a win-all situation.

"I am a strong believer in the preservation of our cultural tradition," he said, adding that there was chauvinism on all sides and the Government's greatest challenge was containing it.

Another principle was equitable distribution of wealth, based on the premise that stability and development could only be achieved if everyone had a stake in it.

There would be violence and challenge to the status quo only if the people felt that there was little to lose.

Moderation over extremism was the other principle which Malaysia advocated, and it did not tolerate bigotry even if it was criticised for it.

"Fourthly, we have long exercised racial and religious harmony," he said, adding that Malaysia did not allow the domination of one race, and had, in fact, done away with policies like the National Cultural Policy.

Culture cannot be imposed but rather it has to be accepted, adopted and practised. This is part of the nation's learning curve and it is a critical lesson, he said.

Malaysia, he said, also had a dynamic and winning political formula, with a policy of inclusiveness and not exclusivity.

Highlighting the place of Islam in Malaysia, he said, the country is, to all intents and purposes, an Islamic nation and "we believe that there is no contradiction between a Muslim and modernity".

Najib said Muslims are encouraged to strive for excellence, achieve economic prosperity and pursue knowledge, and Islam is concerned with justice for the ummah and its relations with non-Muslims.

Stressing the critical role played by the leadership in determining success, he said Malaysia was fortunate to have leaders who emerged at the right time, from Tunku Abdul Rahman to Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Najib said much of Malaysia's success must be attributed to Dr Mahathir who had given much confidence to Malaysians to transform society.

"His benevolence and fortitude will no doubt secure him a special place in the annals of our history," Najib said.

Dr Mahathir's enormous achievements will provide the basis for the country's continued prosperity and his eventual successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, will no doubt provide matured and experienced leadership, he said.