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Consensus stops at extremism

THERE is one simple answer to why extremism is on the rise - Malaysia's democratic space is expanding after decades in which the country's centrist majority had been ably led into taking discretion as the better part of valour. You don't have to be a Marxist-Leninist theoretician to recognise how a handful of unrepresentative radicals can exploit a dire lack of leadership.

The expansion of democratic space means that undemocratic extremism will have to be dealt with in democratic ways. But it is useless to hope that extremists will eventually wither in the sunlight of democratic freedoms. They operate by provocation and fear (including divine fear), not persuasion. In Malaysia's multi-racial, multi-religious society, chauvinists, sectarians and unreformed class warriors can bloom out of the loose ends of its various political spectra. The country's potential fault lines are many. Extremism cannot therefore be met by turning the other cheek. It must be confronted and faced down by those who are equally passionate in defence of the Malaysian ideals of tolerance, moderation and consensus.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had good reason to warn the Gerakan national delegates' conference of the rising danger of all forms of extremism, including the religious and linguistic, and the uncertain ability of some in the Barisan Nasional leadership to challenge it. The leaders of the BN, upon whom rests the responsibility of keeping the country securely camped within the broad middle ground, would be sorely mistaken should they attempt to draw the sting out of racial bigotry by co-opting part of its agenda. Consensus only applies to those who are disposed to it. Against the extremists, hodge-podge solutions are only a sign of weakness.

Gerakan, the professed multi-racial party within the largely race-based ruling coalition, ought to be more mindful of that. Yet it too has wobbled against the extremist onslaught, most glaringly on the contentious terrain of education reform. If the BN's leaders were to wilt before the forces of division, they would have failed the very values they stand for. In a democracy, what works against the enemies of compromise will not be the politics of consensus but of conviction. The Prime Minister must not be left alone to fight them.