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Reconcilable differences

AGREE to disagree. Regard each other as the human beings we are. Address each other with respect, courtesy and goodwill. Attend to that which unites, not what divides, for the former creates while the latter destroys. That, in a nutshell, was the message delivered by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches on Tuesday. Although the intellectual content of that message was contained in the PM's typically eloquent speech at the convention's plenary session, its impact was more to be measured in the "Leadership by Example" Abdullah represented at that landmark encounter, the first such address by a serving Malaysian Prime Minister to the WCC.

Set during a week in which this nation was again tussling with its eternal paradoxes and dilemmas, from the carefully handled limited release of the film, *The Passion of the Christ*, to the conundrum between conservative religious mores and large-scale entertainment shows such as *Sure Heboh*, Malaysia could not have been a more appropriate stage on which to parade the twin truths of diversity: These conundrums may never cease, but they need not distress, much less destroy.

All conflicts can be resolved and differences reconciled with clear sight, discipline, and the courage to hold firm to moral principle. These matters are not zero-sum equations but win-win situations. Platitudes elsewhere, here such ideas are uttered amid the manifest reality of a nation built on compromise, moderation and tolerance. Although it would be unacceptably Pollyanna-ish to claim they are the full and final reality in Malaysia or anywhere else, here these virtues are upheld as not just the best but the only way to go. Courteous consultation in search of consensus has worked such wonders in Malaysia as in few of the developing world's other multi-racial, multi-religious, polyglot post-colonial collages.

The standing ovation Abdullah received at the end of his speech to the WCC was not just for the man, his words and their delivery, but for the nation for which he spoke, whose continuing survival and success has allowed its Prime Minister to speak with the utmost sincerity of attaining some of the most elusive ideals of human co-existence. A generation after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad branded the concept on the national psyche, Malaysia is itself now leading by example.

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