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Right steps to a better future

By U-En Ng

A truly multiethnic Malaysia now seems more than a mere possibility. How much of this can we attribute to the policies of our Government? U-EN NG writes.

LIKE all societies, ours is susceptible to change. Nearly five decades after Independence, the constitution of multi-ethnic Malaysia has evolved into something many hope is more equitable and responsible.

This hope is not misplaced, says Dr Mansor Mohd Noor, a sociologist with Universiti Utara Malaysia. His basis is a series of ethnic studies he conducted over 14 years from 1990 in different socio-economic areas of the country. The results bolster claims that Malaysia is making progress in the establishment of a mature civil society.

How far has this progress been due to Government policy? How much of it can we attribute to the contributions of this nation's five Prime Ministers since Merdeka?

"I would not call these results definitive, but they do give us a general idea of trends," says Prof Abdul Rahman Embong of the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

"And going beyond communal sentiments, if we look at the political attitudes, choices and decisions that Malaysians make, the 1999 elections do indicate that we've started putting broad issues on the agenda instead of those that are strictly communal or ethnic.

"These issues cut across ethnic lines. Democracy, justice, and government transparency attract the attention of all ethnic groups. In this sense, Malaysians now have a greater awareness of universal political issues."

Analysing this year's general election results, Rahman says that, in the main, no party campaigned on purely ethnic platforms.

"To be sure, the parties were ethnically based, but not so the themes of their campaigns.

"Take the Barisan Nasional campaign. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi put an agenda for change on the map and the party focused on good governance, fighting corruption, reforming the public service and refocusing on national economic policies."

Abdullah's leadership style, he says, promoted broad consultation and, in his concept of Islam Hadhari, the Prime Minister offered Malaysians a vision of Islam that was progressive and inclusive.

"Had there been any party that campaigned on an ethnic platform, they would have been rejected," Rahman says.

"There is always contestation. Ethnic perspectives tend to contest multi-ethnic ones, but that contestation isn't that sharp now.

"There was for example no ethnic violence in Malaysia during the financial crisis of the late 1990s. This was not the case in other nations in our region. There was tension, of course, but no violence.

"Today, inter-ethnic bargaining is still an issue - as is the political representation of the communities - but if the present political equation is maintained, then there can be peace.

"In terms of issues, however, the people aren't drawn to interpret events from an ethnic perspective.

In this sense, the policies of our Governments and Prime Ministers have contributed to a growing multi-cultural consciousness."

Rahman identifies progress on three levels. First, economic policies in

place since the 1970s have helped create a multiethnic middle class.

"It encouraged the emergence of professionals and corporate players, especially within the Malay community, and the last elections have brought a renewed sense of confidence and a desire for healthy competition."

Government policies also helped create an environment in which non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been able to flourish, he said.

"The emergence of NGOs over the last 10 years has been very obvious, and most of them focus their activities on universal issues." This isn't a direct product of policy, of course, but a by-product, Rahman says, adding that their existence spoke for a growing public consciousness of the need for civil society participation.

"Also, there are changes in everyday life. Through interaction at the workplace, Malaysians are gradually getting used to the idea that we need a common national goal."

This issue has been the subject of a book published recently by change management analyst and veteran journalist Hng Hung Yong.

His *Five Men & Five Ideas* considers the policies of Datuk Onn Jaafar, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Hussein Onn, and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and their contributions to the creation of a Malaysian national identity based on cultural pluralism.

"Identity formation has been a dynamic process, responding to changing values, attitudes and circumstances," Hng writes.

"The period (we examine) spans 57 years, beginning with Onn in 1946 and ending with Mahathir in 2003.

"This is too short and too limited an experience to allow for the emergence of a definitive national identity, (but) the five leaders were concerned not only with the nature or content of national identity, but also whether the search for this identity will be undertaken.

"Their careers demonstrate an attempt to keep faith with virtues of moderation, accommodation, tolerance and consensus in management of race relations."

Hng adds that this legacy is being strengthened by Abdullah's administration and that public ethics have become a primary policy issue today.

Precisely what shape the citizenship of our country will take in the future depends on our actions today.

While the results of Mansor's surveys indicate tentatively that we have been taking the right steps, most of us agree that the creation of a united and truly multiethnic nation will remain our biggest challenge.

* A full review of Hng Hung Yong's *Five Men & Five Ideas* will appear in *Life & Times* tomorrow.

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