

09/02/2004

Be friends, PM tells youth (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Malaysia's future depends on the ability of its youth, who form 60 per cent of the population, to forge multi-ethnic friendships, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today.

Touching on the once-taboo subject of Malaysia's darkest hour - May 13, 1969 - Abdullah said the aftermath of the bloody racial riots then was an important lesson of history.

Recounting his own experience of that time, Abdullah said things became so touchy that the Chinese were even afraid to be seen eating durian because it was deemed a "Malay product".

He recalled inviting some of his Chinese friends to eat durian at his house, and while they relished it, they "brushed their teeth vigorously" afterwards so that other Chinese would not know what they had done.

"You may find it funny now," he said. "At that time, it wasn't."

Abdullah's sombre tone drove home the message to the large gathering of young Chinese from a federation of eight Chinese youth organisations here today.

The organisations were the Malaysian United Youth Movement, Young Malaysians Movement, the Malaysian Xiang Lian Youth Association, Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia, Young Christian Association of Malaysia, Young Graduates Association of Malaysia, Young Entrepreneurs Association of Malaysia and Mandarin Junior Chambers of Kuala Lumpur.

Top Chinese community and political leaders, including MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and Gerakan president Datuk Seri Lim Keng Yaik, and Umno Youth president Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, were present.

Most of the audience were not even born when the May 13 incident took place, when Malays and Chinese clashed shortly after the 1969 general election.

The violence was largely confined to urban areas, particularly Kuala Lumpur and Penang, and many were killed. The exact number of deaths remains unknown till today.

Reconciliation took years, starting when the country's second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak headed the National Operations Council (NOC), of which Abdullah was a key member, and proceeding under the subsequent leaderships of Tun Hussein Onn and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Abdullah said the country had since developed tremendously, and racial unity had also strengthened in tandem.

"The unity we enjoy today did not materialise overnight.

"It had a beginning. It started when three political parties representing the major races in the country came together and formed an alliance to work for the betterment of all," he said, referring to the initial alliance between the country's three major racial groups through the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).

He said the leaders of these races had the foresight and "a great love" for Malaysia.

"They knew the Malays, Chinese and Indians had no choice but to live together and that it was better to co-operate than quarrel.

"So they formed an alliance, and economic and social programmes were implemented for the common good of all," he said.

Abdullah said the young were "buds of new dynamism", and must have a clear mission and understand the vision the country was striving to

achieve.

He said the current generation of older Malaysians would eventually be gone and the young would inherit the country.

"They must know what has been bequeathed to them, the direction they want to head, and the vision and mission that have to be achieved."

May 13, he said, was compelling evidence that leaders need to consider the interests of all races in the agenda for national development.

Malaysians must make greater effort to understand the sensitivities of others, he said, adding that young Malaysians must forge friendships with those of other races and religions to enable them to understand and accommodate each other's ways of life.

"Friendships, once forged, will tear down all racial and religious barriers. Today, we are comfortable in each other's presence. We can sit and eat together unlike those days when separate meals were served for Muslims and non-Muslims."

Earlier, Malaysian United Youth Movement president Chan Teck Yin, who represented the eight Chinese youth associations, said Abdullah had proven himself as "a leader for all".

"We give the Prime Minister our full support and will back him," Chan said.