

01/01/2003

A time to stand together

Abdullah Ahmad

WHAT a good New Year we had. Last year will go down in history for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's numbing resignation and curative withdrawal. But it is also memorable for the campaigns for greater use of English in our educational system and against militancy and terrorism. For us here, this newspaper's return to profitability, and more importantly, impending gain from operations was cause for some joy.

New Year's Day is a time of high hopes and good wishes, but we in the Press are obliged to provide something more, even though prediction is a mug's game.

I had some satisfaction at the end of 2001 when, with Wall Street sunk low, analysts looking into the coming year forgot to earn their money for the first time in their lives by stammering, "It's too soon to tell". With the world stock market index down by a fifth since that Dec 31 and nearly half its record high, many of them have since been laid off and hopefully found honest jobs.

At the end of 2002, I cannot help hearing again the refrain behind the tinkle of New Year toasts and renditions of Auld Lang Syne: "It's too soon to tell." Last year, most people thought that things would be so bad that they dared not even mention it. The big surprise of the year was that none of that happened.

This year feels less unpredictable than last, and we newspaper pundits will not have to rack our heads thinking up such vivid metaphors as "storm clouds over the horizon".

At times, 2002 seemed like a year in eternal transition, waiting for something to happen. It taught us a valuable lesson in coping, often successfully, with insecurity - not just against terror, but on the economy and politics.

Shortly after the Oct 12 bombings in Bali, any prankster could initiate an SMS message of an imminent attack on KLCC and thin the weekend crowds in Bangsar and other tourist hangouts considerably. A phone call prefaced with "Allahu Akbar" could be enough to close down a scared-silly embassy or two.

Now, hoaxers have to try a lot harder. Middle-class urbanites are beginning to take their nervousness as cowardice. Our intelligence agencies are on to the rumour-mongers and, once again, as against terrorism overall, the Internal Security Act has come in handy. People stop listening when there are too many cries of "Wolf!" and practical

jokes wear thin very quickly.

The war on terrorism, for all its unanswered questions, has given us an extra degree of national cohesion, which few have bothered to notice. Apart from the most limp-wristed liberals, public confidence in the Government in the matter of security is as high as ever, no matter what the Western Press says.

I think Bali will soon recover its paradisaical glory. It has become much cheaper for us to travel there, and I should be glad to see fewer greasy backpackers spoiling the scenery, and more quality tourists instead.

Nevertheless, terrorism remains a worldwide threat and could pit the West against Islam if it continues to be handled the way it is now. Islamic terrorism is non-ideological and non-specific.

It is fuelled by rage, which must be cooled if it is ever to have an end. Inflicting defeat upon fellow Muslims, such as the United States and its allies propose to do with Iraq, is certain to fuel that anger and recruit more suicide bombers.

I think an attack on the Saddam Hussein regime will come some time this year, and all Muslim countries will have to weather its impact. It is foolish to argue about this, as many in the West have attempted to do.

Even Condoleezza Rice, the US National Security Adviser, who really should know better, told visiting Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi last year that war on Iraq would not much affect the largely moderate Islamic world.

She was wrong, and I think she has begun to see it. Washington is countervailing its military strategy with a political one - a PR effort in Arab countries and various programmes on democratisation. But the resources devoted to the former vastly outweigh the latter. Even if Arab countries become more democratic, there is no certainty that they will elect leaders more amenable to the West and its self-serving interests in the Middle East.

There is really no other way to fight Islamic terrorism than to aid Muslim nations to fight it on their own. We have known this for a long time. For the Government and Umno, Sept 11 and 2002 marked a gradual turning of the corner in the fight against religious extremism, militancy and terrorism. The Government's anti-terror offensive is no longer seen as an under-handed attempt to get at Pas.

In other ways, too, support for Pas has receded in the past year, though not by very much. The Pendang/Anak Bukit by-elections still show the Malays to be split, but the Pas advance through the 1999 general election has been thwarted.

As a result, the Opposition party has retreated ever further into doctrinaire theology. Where it governs, in Kelantan and Terengganu, it relies not on effective policy but on totalitarian conformity and grand

gestures of Islamic purity - its campaign tagline in all other States.

Terengganu's hudud enactment is a case in point. I think the State Government always knew it would be unworkable but went ahead with it anyway to squeeze whatever political mileage it could get.

Pas must never be underestimated. These days of uncertainty are working

well for the holy warriors - Hindu, Christian, Jewish as well as Muslim. In times of strife, there is genuine comfort for the soul in religious absolutism. I think it will be harder to judge Pas' level of support this

year, particularly if economic growth slows and the global war on terror goes awry.

The only bulwark against extremism, bigotry and chauvinism of all stripes and colours is a broad-based middle class. Make no mistake: our country's survival depends on it. This time last year (Jan 2, to be exact), I wrote about the Malaysian dream and how important it was to have one.

We need to define what it means to be Malaysian and whether we're on our way to achieving it. I think this lies at the core of our nation-building - whether we can find a singleness that unites us all absolutely, whatever our differences.

Articulating such a dream requires visionary leadership, which was why I was deeply saddened by Dr Mahathir's decision. I, along with many others, did what I could to dissuade him, to no avail. He has given us a fait accompli, another measure of uncertainty that urges Malaysians to wake up out of our complacency and get our basics right. Abdullah, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and others, as I've said before, will cope well.

Our problem, as it has been since Independence, lies in our multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious society. I often wonder why this country hasn't cracked up along its many potential divisions as I've seen in many other countries much less diverse than we are.

Though we all equally avow loyalty to the nation, each of us in our various ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious groups has a slightly different idea of our Malaysianness.

We have been content with being variations on a national theme, often skipping out of key. Such discordance rang in our ears during the often fraught debate on the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English.

The New Year will offer much work for those of us responsible for holding the middle ground against all forms of extremism. The Barisan Nasional, leading the political centre, must make this year memorable for the build-up to the next general election and ensure the coalition's 13th election victory.

February may bring war in the Middle East but we shall celebrate the Chinese New Year in the style we are accustomed to. I will of course

accumulate bills for Hari Raya, family vacations and the New Year celebrations. Well, I always enjoy my guilty pleasures while I can.