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A united three million Umno force can move the world

Hardev Kaur

THE strength of Malaysia is dependent on the unity of the Malays and Umno. Without unity within the largest component of the Barisan Nasional the country will be weak and its population not able to enjoy the benefits of development or the current standard of living.

With disunity, Malaysia, having gained independence from the British, may end up being colonised once again. This time it could be economic colonisation as has happened in many countries. They have political independence but not economic independence and are unable to make their own decisions. They are dictated to by foreign institutions, corporations and foreign interests.

Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi have both repeatedly stressed the importance of unity among Malays and Malaysians. They both repeated their call for unity at the on-going Umno general assembly. Without unity and strength there is nothing to be gained, not even political independence.

The importance of unity was clearly demonstrated when Tengku Abdul Rahman led a delegation to London in 1956 to negotiate for independence. It was the unity and consensus of the representatives of the Malay rulers that clinched the agreement for Merdeka.

Sultan Ibrahim of Johor was the most senior Sultan among the Malay rulers and therefore his consent for independence was crucial. But it is said that he was not keen for Malaya to gain independence as soon as possible because he felt that the Malays were not ready. But the other rulers agreed with Tengku that they should press ahead for independence.

Thus, Datuk Mohd Seth Mohd Said, a member of Tengku's delegation as acting Menteri Besar of Johor, had a heavy responsibility. According to Jen (Rtd) Tan Sri Mohd Ghazali Seth, the instructions to his father, Mohd Seth, from the Johor Sultan were "not to commit to anything definite on his behalf". The events are related by Ghazali in a book Reflections of Pre-Independence Malaya written by Datuk Mohamed Abid.

The British were not prepared to give independence if there was no consensus among the Malay rulers. Mindful of the instructions from the Sultan but also conscious of the need for unity and consensus to obtain the agreement from the British, Seth "agreed wholeheartedly for Malaya to gain independence immediately".

Ghazali adds: "Later my father told me that after his response, the Tengku rushed toward him and hugged him, because if he had disagreed, the British would have further delayed the granting of Independence for Malaya".

Abid contends if Seth had held out in keeping with the Sultan's instructions, Malaya's independence might have been delayed. "It certainly would not have been in 1957." Abid says that it might have been delayed till 1960, till after the death of the Sultan of Johor.

Then again the situation would have changed by then and it is even possible the British may have had different demands. But suffice to say that it was unity of the Malays that convinced the British to grant Malaya independence in 1957.

Seth risked the wrath of the Sultan of Johor for the sake of Malay unity and independence of the country and agreed with the others. There has been no looking back since then for the Malays, Umno and the country. The importance and the power of unity cannot be underestimated.

The achievements of independent Malaya, and now Malaysia, are the envy of many around the world. But these achievements and progress can be lost and foregone very quickly if the Malays are disunited and weak. Just as a show of disunity among the representatives of the rulers in London could have delayed the nation's independence, disunity and weakness within Umno will have serious consequences for the country.

On the other hand, unity and resilience will enable Umno to achieve greater heights and carry the country forward. This will benefit not only the Malays and Umno but all Malaysians and the nation.

Abdullah was also blunt when he urged Umno members not to be complacent and take things for granted. He said: "Do not for a moment think Malay political power will last forever." Just as the Malays cannot let their guard down "just because they dominate the Government and the civil service" they cannot ignore the fact that others are just waiting to see Malays and Malaysia fall to its knees. The critics want to be able to say "I told you so" that locals cannot administer and manage themselves.

The burden on Umno members is tremendous, just as the burden on Seth in 1956 was heavy. But the party, which is set to undergo a leadership change, must continue to ensure that infighting and disunity among members does not undermine the gains, development and progress thus far. Abdullah reminded them that "Malays seek security through political power but because of disunity, their power is not as resilient as before".

A united three million Umno force can move the world, if they so desire. But a divided party and disunity will result in a weak organisation. The lessons from other parties around the world must be learnt. The division, disunity and infighting in once powerful parties such as the Kuomintang in Taiwan, the Muslim League in Pakistan and the Congress Party in India has left them less effective than they originally were or could have been if they had remained united.

But as Dr Mahathir, who is also Prime Minister, said: "Umno is not just any party. Umno is the backbone and prime mover of the party that rules this beloved country. If Umno is strong, then the Barisan Nasional will be strong, the Malaysian Government will be strong and Malaysia will be strong. A weak Umno will bring disaster to all of us."