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## Cultured in tolerance

IN his Chinese New Year message, the Prime Minister urged Malaysians to protect the country's multi-cultural identity and tolerant culture. Coming barely a week after the Deputy Prime Minister's sombre warning that racial polarisation was a frightening possibility if the various races went their own way, it highlights concern at the highest levels over the distressing signs of fragmentation appearing in the Malaysian social fabric.

Dr Mahathir's message is a reminder that the strength of the country has always been its ability to adapt and absorb a multiplicity of cultural influences and in the process become an open and tolerant society. Malaysia has been able to harness the wealth of its multi-cultural resources and turn them into productive engines of social and economic development.

The politics of culture and identity has taken on added significance because self-righteous religious leaders and self-appointed guardians of culture are creating divisions by exploiting differences in religion, race and language. Negotiating these differences in such a way that they complement each other is now a matter of the greatest urgency in the light of recent developments. Sarajevo and Belfast are grim reminders of what can befall nations that fail to check the centrifugal forces unleashed by the politics of difference. Malaysians need to rally to the call for a culture of tolerance and a politics of unity.