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It's just a distant memory

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THAT May 13 is now treated like any other ordinary day, that the date itself no longer evokes fear of riots and curfew, that few Malaysians even give a second thought to the outbreak of racial violence that engulfed Kuala Lumpur 33 years ago indicates how far we have travelled since May 13, 1969.

To be sure, we cannot claim to have achieved complete racial harmony or to have eradicated all possibility of inter-ethnic conflict. Racial passions remain strong and continue to possess considerable potential for combustion as the outburst of inter-racial violence in Kampung Medan two years ago shows.

Moreover, potentially flammable issues like the strong protests by Chinese educationists and Malay language nationalists over the Government's decision to use English to teach Science and Mathematics in schools, as well as the hostility by Pas and Islamic groups over the Government's decision to stop funding for Sekolah Agama Rakyat, underscore the need for continued caution and vigilance.

However, we can claim some success in raising considerably the flashpoint for racial hostilities. That the Asian financial crisis in 1998 caused this country to experience the worst recession since Independence in 1957 without sparking racial conflict or targeting a particular ethnic group as the scapegoat speaks for itself.

That it is now possible to debate rationally Bumiputera weaknesses, in particular, their undue dependence on the Government for jobs, contracts and financial assistance is yet another indicator the temperature for inter-ethnic violence has cooled significantly.

Yet another indicator is the increasing tendency of ordinary Malaysians to respond as a collective whole to humanitarian issues and in sports. On March 24 this year, in an unprecedented move, all MPs from the Barisan Nasional as well as from the Opposition benches were unanimous in passing a resolution condemning unilateral military action by the US and its allies against Iraq.

After the war, ordinary Malaysians from all ethnic groups have contributed generously to appeals for financial aid for the beleaguered Iraqis. In sports events, we cheer all Malaysian competitors - regardless of whether he or she is Malay, Chinese, Indian, a Sabahan or Sarawakian - and regardless of whether their opponent is from Indonesia, China or India.

One major reason for improved inter-ethnic relations is the fact that a significant proportion of Malaysians were born after May 13, 1969. For this group of young Malaysians - whether Bumiputera, Chinese or Indian - May 13 lacks emotional resonance, the New Economic Policy is accepted policy while the Barisan Nasional is a fixture on the political landscape.

Another reason is the success of the Bumiputera community in securing some of the commanding heights, politically and economically. (Paradoxically, success in neutralising the threat of economic dominance by the Chinese means the need for Malay unity is now less compelling).

Additionally, the Bumiputera community's growing confidence has also lessened the need for politicians to adopt an overt racial orientation or to resort to the trinity of issues - bangsa, agama and bahasa - to maintain popular support within the community.

Yet another factor is the schism within the Malay community. After

failing to wrest the Umno presidency from Dr Mahathir in the bitter Umno party elections in 1987, the then Umno vice-president Tengku Razaleigh left the party and established Semangat 46 (S46).

Thereafter, Tengku Razaleigh forged two loose partnerships: Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (APU) with Islamic-oriented parties like Pas and Gagasan Rakyat Malaysia. Established in 1992, Gagasan Rakyat was the platform for several non-Muslim parties including the DAP, the Indian Progressive Front (IPF), the Partai Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), Hamim, Kongres Indian Muslim Malaysia (Kimma) and the Malaysian Solidarity Party.

Although both APU and Gagasan Rakyat enjoyed minimal success and collapsed soon after Semangat 46 was dissolved and its members returned to Umno, the concept of Opposition parties sinking their differing religious and racial orientation and working together had been born.

Ten years later, Pas, DAP and Keadilan got together to form the Barisan Alternatif. Although the DAP subsequently pulled out of the Barisan Alternatif, the establishment of a multi-ethnic coalition modelled along the lines of the Barisan Nasional was another political milestone.

Barisan Alternatif's establishment marks a realisation by even chauvinist parties like Pas and the DAP that gaining power at the Federal level is possible only if they are able to work together and nominate a single candidate in each Parliamentary constituency. Such an arrangement would prevent a split in the Opposition vote.

In terms of inter-ethnic relations, the formation of Barisan Alternatif has had two significant outcomes. First, it could help break the mould of racial politics in this country. Second, a multi-racial Opposition will inhibit even further the use of racial issues to gain popular support.

So where do we go from here?

Unlike the stereotyped indicator of multi-racial harmony highlighted in The Economist article - Malays eating rendang and Chinese feasting on char kway teow with friends from their own community rather than with each other - forging multi-racial harmony is a continuum; it is a process, a journey without end.

Each year, as May 13 passes by unnoticed and indistinguishable from the day before or the day after, it reflects our progress in plaiting together the different ethnic groups into a Bangsa Malaysia - each with its own distinct identity and culture but collectively forming a cohesive whole.

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