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Laying siege to our past

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ON every important national occasion Petronas can be depended upon to come up with a gem of a television advertisement to commemorate the auspicious day.

This year's National Day telead from Petronas is no different.

The story of three boys of different races growing up in a village is poignant, witty and nostalgic.

It was truly funny watching them throw sticks at bunches of mangoes, only to hit a hornets' nest, then having to run off and jump into a river as the hornets turn their unwanted attention on a wedding procession; a very realistic portrayal of days past.

The depiction of the Malay boy being circumcised and hitching a ride on the Indian boy's tricycle, the type used by sundry shop owners to deliver goods, and being pushed by their Chinese buddy, was pure friendship that cut across racial and religious lines.

Such depictions are not new. Datuk "Lat", Malaysia's most celebrated cartoonist, has shared the beautiful past in his collections.

But in a sign of the times we live in, more and more adults are coming up with ideas that open up a gulf in the younger generations.

Take schooling, for example. There is opposition to the establishment of Vision Schools, which are meant to bridge the racial gap.

Many Chinese parents feel more comfortable sending their children to Chinese schools and Malay parents seem bent on turning national schools into religious entities.

Only recently a parent from Selayang expressed her surprise that a principal of a nearby school had issued a letter to guardians of Year One pupils, encouraging Muslim girls to don the tudung.

"I do not see why such encouragement should be put in writing. Can't the child grow up and find out what she wants and when she comes of age, decide whether she should wear the tudung or not?

"If she decides not to, isn't it the responsibility of her parents to advise her on why she should. I am not against the wearing of the tudung but I am not comfortable that a child at such a young age is already being made to figure out religious requirements when she has yet to be able to clean herself up properly," the mother of two lamented.

But she missed the point; the school principal was only encouraging, and not imposing, the rule.

However, the mother argued that when a person of authority "encourages" something of a child that young, the girl cannot but take it as a requirement.

Such policies of "encouragement" make no sense, especially after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself had expressed disappointment with some national schools that he said had been turned into religious schools.

This is where the whole problem lies: that national educational policies - and what Dr Mahathir said reflected those policies - should be ignored by the very instrument expected to implement them.

The tudung issue, trivial as it may seem, is an example of the present-day Malay divide that has been taken to the political podium.

The seeds were sown when Pas took control of Kelantan. The Pas-led State Government almost immediately introduced a policy requiring all Muslim female state employees to wear the tudung.

Female employees of private entities were exempted - seemingly. But then the local authorities started using indirect methods to get in them to wear the tudung.

One effective method was to refuse to issue or renew licences for premises. In most cases, the owners of private companies took the easy way out and insisted that their female Muslim employees wear the tudung, or they ensured that new recruits were prepared to don the headgear.

From the tudung, the Pas-led Kelantan Government moved into higher gear: policies to segregate male and female, and the implementation of hudud. And of late, even uncommon hairstyles have not been spared.

Meanwhile, in a different sort of battle, those living in Kuala Lumpur and other West Coast States fight the Establishment. They fight for justice, freedom of the Press and of speech, for independence of the judiciary and other universal values. They also fight corruption and abuses by the police force.

Surprisingly, Pas too, in its union with Parti Keadilan Nasional and Parti Rakyat Malaysia in the Opposition coalition, supports this battle against the Establishment.

What is difficult to reconcile is the fact that its opposition partners speak of universal values and yet don't bat an eyelid over Pas' efforts to pursue religious policies according to its own interpretations.

There are questions which Pas' partners will need to answer sooner or later; whether forcing youths with weird hair-styles to cut their hair accords with basic human rights or whether forcing a woman to wear the tudung is an abuse of one's individual rights.

There are also the question of whether the freedom of speech includes the right to question the laws that have been promulgated by Pas and declared Islamic, and whether threats not to issue licences to companies whose female employees do not wear the tudung is tantamount to abuse of power by a uniformed unit.

This should bring the citizenry to another level of thought: should they trust the opposition coalition to fight for all the universal values it claims to subscribe to when its component parties can't even get their partner Pas to subscribe to them.

Instead, the partners seem to be quite agreeable to Pas having two sets of manifestos, one for the Malay-dominated States and another a joint manifesto with them for the rest of the nation.

The opposition coalition is trying to make Malaysians believe that its national manifesto will observe all the universal values, most of which are inscribed in the country's Constitution.

At the same time, it seems to ignore the fact that citizens living in Pas-dominated States will not be allowed, let alone have the opportunity, to subscribe to the national policies.

How long can the opposition coalition protect the national Constitution from being "hijacked" by Pas' Islamic fervour?

If Pas is the leading partner in the Government, meaning it commands the majority of seats in Parliament, then how is the opposition coalition to protect the Constitution, which Pas has described as secular?

Will the opposition coalition be strong enough and commanding enough to stop Pas from turning the national Constitution into a more Islamic instrument?

Furthermore, if Pas wants to implement all the Islamic rules, something which it has been trying to do in Kelantan and Terengganu, then surely the Federal Constitution will need to be amended?

Right now some of Pas' Islamic policies in Kelantan and Terengganu cannot be pursued because they are considered ultra vires to the Federal Constitution.

All these questions need to be answered and explained. The tasks squarely lie in the hands of Keadilan and PRM, not the DAP or the Barisan Nasional.

However, don't expect that to happen. It will only strain the relationship between the opposition coalition partners and Pas. That will not serve their purpose as the objective is to defeat the BN at whatever cost to Malaysians, regardless of race.

Much of the blame for these political developments can, indeed, be placed on BN's shoulders.

Yet the political changes promised by the alternative coalition are anything but glorious.

The Petronas advertisements should be guarded well and locked away in the archives. One day, they may be the only reminder of the nation's glorious past.

For the present, dark clouds on the political horizon beckon.