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Staying with a winning formula

IF it ain't broke, don't fix it. In a nutshell, that sums up why we should keep the Barisan Nasional as it is, a coalition of political parties representing the various ethnic groups. Changing the BN into a single party is an ideal that may evolve into a reality in future. In practice, however, politics is hardly so docile. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made the point clear when he said the present set-up enabled all races to be proportionally represented and that the BN framework had worked effectively since before Independence. Indeed, it was the Umno-led tripartite Alliance that hastened Merdeka.

A single party may seem to unify multi-racial Malaysia under a common banner. But this presumes a consolidated political identity that is still a work-in-progress. Malaysia remains a nation of minorities, measured in social, economic, political as well as demographic terms, whose unity depends on a balance of interests honed by consensus.

At the present time, a single party cannot represent the competing races sufficiently to negotiate broad-based agreement. Far from forging unity, leaders from different ethnic groups will be under excessive pressure from their own communities to fight for their interests and rights. Consequently, single parties claiming to be ethnically neutral in principle have had to be ethnically specific in winning votes.

The Independence of Malaya Party, later Party Negara, was a gallant but futile attempt to rise above communal politics. The DAP too has failed miserably in its multi-ethnic appeal - it is still a Chinese-dominated party with hardly any Malay support. On the other hand, years of successful cohabitation have left the major components of the BN acutely sensitive to the diversity of concerns under the coalition umbrella.

Malaysians still cling to their racial identities for a sense of security, support and comfort. Racial integration rather than assimilation was a wise choice. It has served the country well. Until such time as a truly Bangsa Malaysia emerges, the politics of consensual accommodation among the various races under the BN is still the best formula for a peaceful and progressive multi-ethnic nation.