

Out of the shadows, one in spirit
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WE are, my friend Jamil Ahmad observed, afraid of our own shadows. I agree. We have become too fidgety, fearing that every fever is a cancer or could lead to a heart attack. Jamil and I were having a drink and our conversation drifted to the state of the nation and the inevitable "then and now" topic.

Too many things have become sensitive. Too many people are suffering from myopia and viewing everything through racial — even racist — glasses.

A Chinese boy punches his Malay classmate. Oh, Oh! A Malay man rapes a Chinese girl. Oh, Oh! An Indian is caught for robbery and suddenly all Indians are suspect.

A case in point is the recent spate of rapes in Johor. Almost all the victims were Chinese while the perpetrators were said to be Malays. There was mass myopia. Why should a criminal offence take on racial tones?

Being Old Edwardians, it was only natural that we reminisced about our alma mater, King Edward VII School, and how innocent relationships were then compared with today.

We used to call each other names but no one got offended. A quarrel between two students was just that. No one worried that it would turn into a racial issue. Of course, we did not mind watching the fight. We went to each other's houses. We ate in each other's homes.

Jamil, Aziz and other friends would walk into my house and ask for thosai and my mother was happy to make it for them. They never thought: "This is the house of a Hindu. Can I eat here?"

I used to cycle to Aziz's house, telling him in advance to get his mother to make laksa. She used to make mouth-watering laksa. It never crossed my mind that this was the house of a Muslim.

And we had teachers who never did anything to show racial preference, so unlike some of today's teachers. If a student had to be punished, he was. Political or racial considerations were not factors which influenced the way the school authorities dealt with any situation.

The cane of my principal, the late Mr Long Heng Hua, was impartial to the buttocks arrayed before it. Whether they belonged to a Malay or Chinese or Indian or to the son of a VIP, the cane sang its lusty song and the student screamed his muffled scream.

Why have we become less Malaysian and more Malay, Chinese, Indian or Kadazandusun?

Could it be that we believe if we do not support someone of our race, we may be seen as a traitor to our race? Could it be that since the Eighties, too many people in authority — especially at the middle levels — have been bitten by the bug called bigotry? Could it be the growing power of religious teachers and the Arabisation of an increasing number of Malays? Could it be that the schism dividing some religions elsewhere in the world has been imported here?

Could it be the feeling that money can buy anything, including influence and power? Could it

be that we are allowing ourselves to be held hostage by the views of extremists, fearing they will turn violent if we upset them? Could it be the fear that introducing reforms might rock the power base of political parties?

Could it be the way some policies are implemented? Or could the problem lie with the policies themselves? Could it be that more people — fearing a real or perceived threat to their cultures — have become afflicted by a double dose of tribal consciousness? Or could it be that our education system got screwed up somewhere along the way?

We should address these and other similar issues. We are not engaging in sufficient discourse about these issues. We fear it will start an avalanche of racial troubles that will bury us. We fear shadows.

And there is much shadow play going on, too. Time and again, we are told not to raise sensitive issues. But would it not be better to raise sensitive issues — and discuss them — in a mature manner?

Jamil and I think Malaysians are made of sturdier stuff than we care to acknowledge. We think most Malaysians can undertake a discussion without going for each other's throat. At 50, we should be ready for dialogue.

When Malaya got independence, there was talk that the racial mix would not work and that it would only be a short time before the races clashed. Malaysians proved them wrong.

Malaysians — no matter what race — really want to live in peace. This is our strength. It is time, too, to drop the May 13 bogey. We should stop fearing shadows.

It is time for us to stop whispering "sensitive issue", as though a louder vocalisation of those words would result in a cataclysm of nuclear-bomb proportions. After 50 years, it is time to openly discuss these sensitive issues — but in a gentlemanly manner.

Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin suggests that sensitive issues be first discussed within closed doors by Barisan Nasional component parties. Then, the debate can include non-governmental organisations and others. That's a start.

While it is important that sensitive issues be discussed, it is equally important that no one comes to the discussion lugging the baggage of "only I am right" or "only my way is right". The overarching goal should be a united Malaysia.

That's why I laud Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's call to Malaysians to inculcate the spirit of 1957. "The British could not do anything but step down when they saw how united and strong the Malays, Chinese and Indians were. We had one goal — to achieve Merdeka," the prime minister said at the 54th MCA general assembly on Sunday.

"We have to return to and regain that same spirit of understanding and togetherness for our 50th year of independence."

I cannot claim to know about the spirit of '57. I was a child then. But I have heard my father talk about it with gusto. He never tired of telling me that leaders in those days made huge personal sacrifices for the good of the people.

He had high praise for the Tunku, often saying there would never be another like him. He used to say that the Tunku saw everyone as a Malaysian even though he was head of a

Malay party and that that was the main reason ultras in the party wanted him out.

My father was one of those who were saddened when the Tunku was shoved aside in the Eighties. He felt it was no way to treat Bapa Malaysia.

My father said: "All the Merdeka leaders — whether they represented the Malays or Chinese or Indians — never tired of saying that our destinies were intertwined.

"I remember the Tunku saying at one gathering in Taiping that Malays, Chinese and Indians were all in the same boat, as he pointed to an Alliance party flag bearing the symbol of a boat. He said we had to row together to reach our destination and that if every race rowed in different directions we would never go anywhere."

Years later, the Tunku used the same analogy when I met him at his house. He had retired as prime minister but his love for the people remained. Tunku said: "Malaysia is like a boat. If the boat sinks, we will all sink. So we have to keep it afloat. We have to co-operate. We must row together. If water gets in, we have to scoop it up and throw it out together. Then we will be safe and happy. That is what I want for this blessed country."

My father was carried away by the spirit of '57. "People of diverse racial origins realised they had to live with one another; that this was their home. So, there arose a spirit of friendliness and friendships bloomed.

Everyone felt there was a place in this country for them. Everyone felt a sense of ownership of this land.

"Many issues were discussed openly. The Alliance leaders never shirked difficult issues. Even ordinary people used to talk about racial issues in coffee shops. But our talks never turned acrimonious. There was a sense of wanting something good for everyone; a sense of inclusiveness; a sense of sharing a common destiny."

He said somewhere along the way, people began to clamour for leadership positions for reasons that were far from altruistic. Somewhere along the way, he said, the rot set in.

From what I have heard and read, our founding fathers were true patriots, as defined by Abdullah. The prime minister said at the MCA assembly that true patriots were those who considered the needs and feelings of others without discriminating.

Abdullah echoed similar sentiments at the 2007 Youth Patriotism Congress at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre a day earlier. "A true Malaysian patriot loves Malaysia and all Malaysians."

As the prime minister said, the spirit of '57 must prevail. Over the years, there have been several national mantras. As we celebrate 50 years of independence, the mantra should be: "The spirit of '57".

Then we need not be afraid of our own shadows. Then we can savour the Latin saying: Magni Nominis Umbra (Under the shadow of a great name). Then there can be a comfortable place for all of us under the shadow of a great Malaysian nation peopled by patriots.

With independence, let all people who consider Malaya their home cultivate the spirit of goodwill, peace and happiness towards one another. — Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj

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