

To go far, it's best that we go together
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"A TRUE Malaysian patriot loves Malaysia and all Malaysians."

With that sound bite, the prime minister summarised the way forward for every citizen of this country to follow. We have to discard the racial baggage of the past to move on. Malaysia's special diversity, as he puts it, is our strength that has kept the country together. In order to survive, we have no choice but to understand each other. Co-operation, tolerance and respect for each other are key ingredients for a country as unique as Malaysia.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was addressing a 1,000-strong gathering largely made up of students at the 2007 Youth Patriotism Congress in Putrajaya last Saturday.

He spoke from the heart, reminding participants of the need to be united. The various communities' destiny is intertwined so they have no choice but to work together. He told the audience "we must remain together forever".

Pak Lah reminded them the road to excellence, glory and distinction ("cemerlang, gemilang, terbilang") is a bumpy one.

A country like Malaysia could easily become an anarchy. It takes a spark to create racial upheaval. "If Malaysia is in trouble, nobody can survive," he warned. The best of intentions to achieve greater heights would be severely jeopardised.

True, to be the best among the best, we have to place a new marker for excellence but, more importantly, to ensure the various races live in harmony.

The two-day congress was co-organised by the Ministry of Education, Biro Tatanegara and Universiti Utara Malaysia. The theme was "Patriotism is our survival".

Perhaps patriotism is too lofty an ideal for some. The concept is losing its steam among the nation's young. But the congress is an important step in acknowledging that patriotism is as crucial to a nation as it is a virtue for every citizen.

Call it by any other name or manifest it in whatever way, but patriotism should be alive and kicking in this country. Perhaps it is even true that patriotism as a concept means little when one is living in comfort.

Someone famously said when a nation is filled with strife, patriotism flourishes.

There have been intense debates of late on the need to address the widening racial divide in this country. Things are not as they used to be. We were more tolerant of each other back then; we worked and played together. Students of different ethnic groups could live together as roommates.

Today, the universities reflect what is happening in our society. Multi-culturalism rings hollow now.

Some would argue that the paths of millions of our students never cross. Schools are

supposed to inculcate a sense of belonging among the different races. But our children go to schools based on ethnic lines.

Furthermore, schools have become a political agenda for some. There are far too many interest groups clamouring for attention. The children suffer. I am not talking about the quality of education, but the natural process of racial integration.

We learnt the hard way in 1969. We addressed the problem with a mix of social engineering, patriotism and sloganeering. But as we progressed, we tended to forget that there are other things than just a robust economy and the stunning skylines of our cities.

Our people, the greatest asset of the country, need a common bond. Addressing disparity of income, eradication of poverty and demolishing identification of vocations along racial lines are merely part of the bigger narrative. Integration is sacrosanct in ensuring peace and harmony.

There are, however, misguided Islamists who believe everything is determined by "us" and "them" or "halal" and "haram". Nothing else matters.

As some Malays become more Muslim, they become less tolerant of others and, in fact, they would rather become less Malay. There are some who would hijack everything in the name of religion.

Pak Lah addressed the issue of intolerance among Muslims at the Umno general assembly last year. "These narrow-minded, intolerant people have their own agenda, to see Malaysia destroyed as a multiracial and multi-religious country." We all applauded him for his truthfulness and forthrightness.

Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein wrote an interesting piece in the New Sunday Times last week. As always, you could see his optimism and unbridled enthusiasm in addressing the question of multiracialism, particularly in schools.

He should know the complexity of the matter. He is the minister of education, under whose charge are at least 10,000 schools, more than 300,000 teachers and five million students. It's a tall order to bring sanity and coherence to such a massive institution. After all, everyone claims a birthright to education.

Hishammuddin believes multi-racialism is very much alive in our schools. The nay-sayer would argue the education system has too many flaws and is perhaps even losing its shine. Hishammuddin thinks otherwise; that what you see is the "growing up" of the education system, which accommodates a myriad of types of schools.

And, yes, the education system has been tested by numerous challenges, barrages of criticism, endless complaints and intense scrutiny. But, sadly, as he laments, very little praise.

Cheer up, sir. We would not have achieved the position we are in had it not been for our education system. No, it is not perfect. But it has served its purpose and the needs of our people over the years. We are in the business of improving the system, not just touching it up with a coat of paint here and a cosmetic implant there.

Education is a serious business that needs constant readjustments and paradigm shifts. The system, as stipulated in Vision 2020, is to set "new standards" and achieve "new results".

But, more importantly, for Hishammuddin, the objective is not just to give the best education for our children but to ensure the system unites the various races of the country. He needs help there. It is timely, while we are in the mood to celebrate Malaysia at 50, to reflect on how education can further strengthen the ties that bind us as a nation.

I'm reminded of an African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."

This reflects the spirit of the education policy in a multiracial country like ours. Let's go far together. That is the very essence of patriotism.

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