

Free... but still shackled by our ethnicity
New Straits Times (Columns)
31 Aug 2007
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THERE is nostalgia as the nation celebrates 50 years of independence from the British today. The veterans who were at the Padang on that historic day recall the excitement and happiness. Tunku Abdul Rahman, who led the negotiations and obtained an agreement from the British, was unable to hide his excitement on that historic day.

"I do not know which way to turn. I am as enthusiastic and as excited as a child being given a new toy," he told the media gathered to report on the independence of Malaya. Even as he described it "as the greatest day in our history", Tunku was fully aware of the challenges that lay ahead for the newly-independent nation.

"With freedom, there is much to do for us all. Freedom must bring with it opportunities to all; to the needy, new hope, to the sick and afflicted, relief, to those distressed and in want, help," he said in his speech at an Alliance rally in Kuala Lumpur on Aug 30, 1957.

His promise to the people was that "we shall build our social, economic and educational structures so that the new nation will rear its head sturdy and proud and the people happy and contented.

"It is freedom for the Malayan people and once this torch of freedom is lit, let us hold it up high so that all around us will glow with radiant happiness. Let freedom be secured for all the law-abiding people."

He assured the gathering "there will be freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom from want, freedom of association, freedom of assembly and freedom of movement".

"Our planning will provide for improvement in economy and industrial advancement of this country, for improved standard of living and social condition, for general and advanced education, for improvement in the standard of health and for carrying out the ambitious road-building and water-supply programmes."

Certainly, the country has come a long way in these 50 years. Much has been achieved as the country today stands tall among the community of nations. Its achievements, development and progress are the envy of many, including the developed nations. But the road ahead is equally, if not more, challenging. And much of what Tunku spoke of in the early days still holds true today.

The multiracial, multireligious and multicultural Malaysian society living in peace and harmony is an example for other nations to emulate, but it cannot be taken for granted. Tunku admitted "we have internal problems and these problems require our immediate attention".

Numerous internal issues continue to demand attention not only of the government but also of the associations, professionals and political parties.

Among the issues that needed immediate attention, according to Tunku on the eve of independence, were the needs of the multi-racial population "that has to be taught and trained to consider this country as their home".

In some ways, that is an ongoing exercise even as Malaysians of Indian and Chinese ancestry today consider Malaysia their home. At the same time, however, Malaysians continue to be divided by their ethnicity. We should all be proud to be Malaysians irrespective of whether we are Malay, Indian or Chinese. We should be Malaysians first and last. Race-based politics should not be allowed to divide the population. That is a recipe for disaster.

The British had not done much on this front and indeed kept the different races apart — the Indians in the rubber estates, the Chinese in the tin mines and the Malays in the rural areas.

This could not continue in a newly-independent nation that had set its sights on joining the ranks of other more progressive countries. And it cannot continue in a nation set to join the ranks of the developed world.

The sense of being a Malaysian has to be instilled very early, that is in schools. Tunku had rightly pointed out: "A lot of spade work has to be done to inculcate in their minds and to bear in their hearts the true significance of loyalty to this country of which they are nationals. On the whole, they are peaceful and sport-loving, they are polite and friendly; and they have cultivated in the course of their association with this country a common Malayan characteristic."

The solution to developing the Malayan characteristic was "through education, social work, civic courses". This is still the best way to ensure that Malaysians of different races and religions better understand and appreciate each other.

The "unity in diversity" of the different races and cultures adds to the uniqueness that is Malaysia. Politicians should not and cannot continue to harp on race-based issues if the nation is to remain united and progress.

The physical development of the country must be matched by the maturity of thought of its population. In an independent nation, its citizens, irrespective of race and religion have a duty and responsibility.

The Tunku said: "In this hour of our triumph and rejoicing, let us not forget those who have sacrificed their lives or their limbs to make this country safe for us to live in."

And for the sake of those who fought for independence and for the sake of future generations and the nation, Merdeka must encompass all aspects of our lives and not remain just a word or slogan that we shout on Aug 31 each year.

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