

## **COMMENT | 63 years later down the road - whither goes Malaysia?**

**Malaysiakini**

**31 August 2020**

**Philip Rodrigues**

COMMENT | After 63 years of independence and eight prime ministers (including one who returned the second time), Malaysia is nowhere near the dream of becoming a land of "happy abode".

What had started off on a promising note on Aug 31, 1957, turned out to be quite a different story from the one the father of independence Tunku Abdul Rahman had in mind.

When Tunku proclaimed independence to the 20,000 crowd at Stadium Merdeka on that "greatest day" in the country's history, he passionately hoped that the peninsula, now freed from the chain of colonialism, would be a "beacon of light in a disturbed and distracted world".

Today, the world is no better than in Tunku's time. It is not only disturbed and distracted but torn by internecine political conflicts, senseless wars, religious

strife. And the light that shone from our new nation grew ever dimmer with the passage of time.

Granted, the country had made great strides in various fields of endeavour but in modern Malaysia, there is a feeling of uneasiness at the way the narrative has been unfolding.

The most telling comment about the country is that it is falling apart along racial and religious lines. The bond that should have united us, as Tunku had so ardently wished, had slackened considerably to the extent that the national identity has lost its character, uniqueness and strength.

Hence, the question keeps popping up: are we Malaysians? In the Tunku's mind, the answer is unambiguous: "We are all Malaysians." That should have settled the matter but it cropped up again because the focus had shifted insidiously to the importance of racial supremacy.

It is not too difficult to put the finger on who could be held responsible for souring race relations. Politicians. In their unbridled greed for power and influence, and high-octane dislike of an inclusive approach to governance, they have harnessed the one weapon that could easily inflame passions - race baiting.

These unscrupulous politicians wrote a different script in which they regarded one race as more superior to the other races. This dominant race would control all the engines of power, and enjoy a larger slice of the economic pie without having to toil and sweat for it.

No one can question the pre-eminent position of the superior race because, according to the politicians, Malaysia is a Malay world where other ethnic groups are living on sufferance.

This distorted view of a Malay-centric country goes against the very grain of what Tunku had vehemently argued all along - that all citizens are Malaysians - and that "unity is our fundamental strength as a people and as a nation".

The argument that only the dominant race must control the government machinery does not hold water because all Malaysians are eminently qualified to aspire to all the top offices in the public sector. But the blinkered political zealots will not accept such an enlightened view.

As if the race card is not enough, these politicians are playing up religion as another tool to strengthen their grip on political power. What they have in mind is ultimately the creation of a state in which religion will seep into every aspect of

daily life.

These fanatical advocates of a religion-based government are not too keen to accept the sensible and wholesome view that in a pluralistic society, religion should not enter into the public domain and regulate life.

A nation which bases its "political administration on religion" would only create more problems and lead to endless tension. The Tunku was right in his strong belief that in a multiracial and multireligious Malaysia, there is "no room" for a state based on religion.

What then has Malaysia got to show to the world after 63 years of independence? Are we a developed nation? A model of political stability and economic prosperity? An exemplar of moral leadership and integrity? An education system of a world-class standard?

It is difficult to give a positive, confident response to all these nagging questions but one thing is certain: we are living in dangerous times where religious bigotry and rabid racism are rearing their pock-marked faces.

In his stirring Merdeka proclamation, the Tunku had urged the people to "work and strive with hand and brain to create" this new nation, but today politicians are using their hands and brains to damage the delicate national fabric knitted so

painstakingly over the years.

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Source: <https://www.malysiakini.com/columns/540734>