

Towards national reconciliation
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At a forum in Penang last week, I made it crystal clear that any government is duty-bound to show greater concern and care towards the weak minorities of society.

As the audience nodded in agreement, I added, 'By weak minorities, I actually don't mean you.' And they looked puzzled.

'Who qualifies as among the marginalised in Malaysia if not the non-bumiputera?', they must have been wondering. I then explained the most downtrodden can be found among the Orang Asli, Orang Asal, the Indians, the Malays and of course the Chinese, but certainly not the middle-class Chinese Malaysians sitting comfortably in the hall listening to someone preaching about distributive justice. I was pleased to see their understanding of the issue at the end.

NONEI suppose it is human nature to perceive oneself as a victim. It is, however, one's refusal to break out of the victim mentality that prevents the various communities in a nation from reaching reconciliation.

Here in Malaysia, the Malays are reminded ad nauseam by Umno that five centuries of colonisation have rendered them a weak-willed people, so much so that if they really appreciated the scale of challenge in seeking modernity, they would crumble like apam balik crust.

Four decades after he penned *The Malay Dilemma*, the perpetually bitter and vengeful Dr Mahathir Mohamad still chooses to deceive the Malays by portraying them as weak and incompetent. The mindset of victimhood is now the single most formidable obstacle in anyone's effort to move the country forward.

In contrast to Mahathir's essentialist approach, Syed Hussein Alatas in *The Myth of the Lazy Native* argued categorically that racial construction of Malays as intractably indolent was pivotal to creating a race-based economic structure.

'Plight' being exploited

To elaborate, I would say the decision of the Malay not to participate in colonial plantation and mining capitalism was a rational choice, for who would want to toil and till under the scorching sun in return for meager pay, only to enrich the capitalist classes? Blessed are those who opt to fish and farm in the countryside just to satisfy their modest needs!

Hence, identity politics and racial stereotypes were an inalienable part of the process by the colonialists to buttress their ruling power. But the biggest tragedy remains the fact that this colonial mindset was continued long after the colonialists had gone. Today, the very chest-beating elites are in haste to appeal for privileges based on colonial clichés that the Malays are too 'backward' and 'ill-equipped' to compete with others.

azlanAs Farish A Noor argues powerfully in his book *What Your Teacher Didn't Tell You*, the communitarian mindset that prevails among the leaders of Umno has been internalised and mirrored by the equally communitarian mindset of the leaders of other parties, who have failed to take us forward as one plural nation.

Despite that it was the inter and intra-party squabbles and conflicts that were responsible for the political and judicial crises of 1969, 1987/88 and 1998/99, many Malaysians still believe the coalition politics exemplified by Barisan Nasional to be a force of stability. Most perplexing of all, the Malaysian populace at large continues to allow these race-based parties to manipulate our feelings and sentiments!

All this has only served to strengthen the victim mentality of the Malays, whose 'plight' is now readily exploited by the likes of Ibrahim Ali (above) and Mahathir to deepen the communal divide. Being the 'ultimate' victims of colonialism, the Malays can do no wrong. Since they can do no wrong, no apology is needed even if one is at fault. Just witness the pressure applied on Siti Inshah Mansor, the principal in Kulai, to not apologise for her racist slurs.

What about the non-Malays?

No doubt, they are the victims of state-sanctioned racism, but it does not give them the excuse to be consumed with victimhood. The latest video clip by Namewee is a case in point, as he continued to employ racist language to articulate the anger popularly shared by the Chinese, especially the younger generation.

'I am sorry'

But it is Namewee's inability to ditch the victim mentality, rather than the vulgarity in his works, that really worries me. Time and again, he resorts to racism, sexism and male chauvinism, ending up reinforcing the prejudices and stereotypes in Malaysian society. He is indeed entitled to his freedom of expression, but the difference between righteous wrath and personal vengeance cannot be more staggering.

Siti and Namewee are both victims of racist politics, but their preoccupation with victimhood will only widen the communal gap, making national reconciliation an uphill battle.

new economic policy nepSelf-pity is like narcotics; it does give momentary pleasure, but also separates the victim from reality. Perception of victimhood, on the other hand, makes one feel right and justified in everything that one does. The NEP is therefore necessary because the Malays are weak, its defiance of natural justice notwithstanding.

Meanwhile, the non-Malays need not apologise for the wrongs that they have done to others, such as the logging business – mostly owned by Chinese tycoons with the connivance of the ruling elites – that has displaced the indigenous populations from their traditional lands in Sarawak. After all, how can a victim be a perpetrator simultaneously? Why doesn't the racist state apologise 'to me first'?

When everybody lays claim to victimhood, it renders forgiveness impossible, for we all demand others to take the first step and say 'I am sorry'. Little wonder that our nation stands still while ethnic relations worsen.

As the country celebrates Hari Raya, will we make use of the festive season to just wish each other Selamat Aidilfitri, Maaf Zahir dan Batin, in doing our bit to arrest the moral decline in society?

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