

**Nation-building - failure a costly option**  
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'It is my pleasure to be here to deliver the keynote address at this Roundtable Discussion on 'National Unity and Development in Malaysia: Challenges and Prospects for Nation Building'. I am always happy to take part in an event where there are many young informed Malaysians. I find that this is time well spent. Not only does it give me a chance to share my thoughts, but it also lets me do a bit of opinion research among the younger generation. We like to say that our youth are the future of this country, but then we proceed to ignore or marginalise them. We want our future generations to be able to think and act wisely, but then we do not give them sufficient opportunities to do so.

In my view, this is not a good way to prepare those who will take our place. If the young are to be good leaders and citizens, they must be exposed to more than just abstract concepts. Even those nation states which have failed miserably have had great political ideals. I believe that good and upright leadership must be demonstrated. It has to be both taught and observed at work. Then, those who are found to be able must be mentored by those who are capable. In this way, success can be learned and replicated. Finally, the young must be given responsibilities they can handle. They should be allowed to make mistakes along the way as part of their overall learning process. If we do these things, our actions will echo loudly into the future.

My address this morning is on the challenges and prospects of nation-building, a topic that is of the greatest and gravest importance. Nation-building is essential to national unity which lies at the heart of what this country was, is and will be. With the passage of time, it seems that we are starting to forget this and it is imperative that we do not. In the time available, I hope to say enough to provide some fuel for the discussions to follow. It is my earnest wish that you will gain some further perspectives on the nature of nation building and that you will also deliberate on specific actionable ways to further it in this country.

Confucius insisted that language must be properly used if things are to get done, if justice is not to go astray, and if people are not to 'stand about in helpless confusion'. He disapproved of those who misused words to hide their true intentions and actions. So what exactly is nation-building? Not surprisingly, there are many definitions, some which differ by a little and others by quite a lot. In his book, *The Making of a Nation*, for example, Professor Cheah Boon Kheng defined it as 'both economic progress and socio-political integration of a nation, ie, prosperity and national unity'.

This captures what are hopefully the two end results of nation building, but it makes no mention of its nature and process. I prefer the more common understanding, which is that it is the use of state power across different dimensions to ensure that a country is politically stable and viable in the long term. These dimensions include ethnicity and religion.

As a brief footnote, it should be noted that nation-building is a heated and even hated notion in some parts of the world. The main reasons for this are, first, that it is taking place in the midst of great domestic turmoil and, second, that it is primarily initiated and managed by foreign powers. Trying to cobble a functioning state by papering deep social and political rifts is, of course, easier said than done. History has shown us time and again, that it is much easier to break down, rather than build up, nations.

In the case of Malaysia, nation-building has occurred in generally peaceful circumstances. It was not imposed by another country. And it is undertaken mainly by collective choice rather than compulsion. The fact that we have been able to forge a nation without resorting to the rule of the gun has made us something of a rarity and a case to be studied, if not emulated. It has allowed a relatively effective system of governance to develop. Our track record at development and resolving problems such as illiteracy, poverty and poor health has been good.

There is, of course, much more that can be done. Our institutions of governance are far from perfect and quality improvements will probably occupy us for at least the next fifty years, if not longer. Nevertheless, for all the criticisms that have been made, it is only common sense that we could not have survived, let alone prospered, these last fifty years if government institutions had not been responsive or effective.

### **Religion not the cause**

So what are the central challenges to nation-building going forward? Let me speak first more generally about the world, and then move specifically to Malaysia. To my mind, there are many challenges, but the one that stands out most is that of having to balance the need for change with that of continuity. Globalisation, in particular, has unleashed sweeping economic, political, social and cultural transformations that have weakened national institutions, values and norms.

It is as if all the boats on the ocean had suddenly lost their anchors, rudders and compasses overnight. Naturally, this has produced a strong reaction in the form of a desire to preserve identity, character and tradition. These are among the strongest motivations known to mankind and have been at the foreground or background of practically every conflict that has ever been waged. Add to this, a deep sense of deprivation, powerlessness and injustice, both real and imagined, and the tension between change and continuity mount greatly.

Managing change on a national level is never easy, and certainly not on the scale and speed that we are witnessing. Multi-ethnic countries have to be especially watchful, and particularly if they have a weak sense of national collective identity. In the absence of a strong binding nationalism, they are prone to polarisation and competition along ethno-religious lines. The state, which may well start out by being a relatively honest broker, can become increasingly pressured to act in ways that favour the interests of one group over another. If the pendulum swings too far in one direction, dissatisfaction and frustrations will inevitably result. These can be expressed in ways that range from passive non-cooperation to active opposition and even violent conflict. To a large extent, this has led to the fragmentation of states.

Countries need to recognise the larger macro forces at work and understand their implications. They have to engage creatively to ensure that there are sufficient investments in social capital and cohesion. They must create and capitalise on cooperative systems within societies. In recent times, it has become usual to try and place the blame for the disintegrating state of world affairs on the doorstep of religion. This is a misunderstanding of the first order. Religion is not the cause of societal dystrophy; it is the antidote. It is a social stabiliser that allows believers to reconnect to values that are fast being lost in today's ever more materialistic and self-centred world.

What does Malaysia have to do to ensure that it continues to be successful at nation-building? Psychologists say that our short-term memory can only hold seven items.

Let me outline seven guidelines that I think will have to be borne in mind in future nation-building efforts.

First, Malaysians of all races, religions, and geographic locations need to believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that they have a place under the Malaysian sun. Only when each citizen believes that he or she has a common home and is working towards a common destiny, will he or she make the sacrifices needed for the long haul. In Malaysia, the Federal Constitution, the Rukun Negara and Vision 2020 encapsulate the rights, hopes and aspirations of the population in a way that no other documents do. The integrity of these documents must be defended and promoted, especially the first.

Second, when we seek solutions to problems in nation-building, we must be careful not to assume away problems. Nation building is required precisely because there are stark differences within society. If we all walked, talked and thought the same, it would probably not be needed. There will therefore be chauvinistic groups in this country, just as there are in others. They will fight the idea of national unity, block social change and try to be politically dominant.

The existence of these groups, however, does not mean that nation building is a futile exercise. It does mean that we must be prepared to negotiate our way through and around these differences. We can, for example, create social movements that aim to enlighten and dissuade popular support being given to them.

Third, nation building requires accommodation and compromise. In our haste to be prescriptive, we should not be so idealistic that we are incapable of also being practical. We should not allow perfection to be the enemy of the good. Yes, we should seek the best solutions and expect the highest standards of performance. But we should also be prepared to sacrifice some part of our positions for the good of the whole. The virtues of pure self-interest are largely a myth. What seems to be a reality is that individuals end up worse off when they act out of self-interest, as opposed to acting in their collective group interests.

### **A process, not outcome**

Fourth, if nation-building is to be successful, enforced solutions must be avoided. Nation-building is effectively rendered null and void by coercion or the threat of violence. 'Might' cannot and must not be shown to be 'right'. If solutions cannot be found within the political and social structures, there will be a strong temptation to resort to illegitimate ways and means.

Fifth, nation-building occurs when society is open, tolerant and forward-looking. So important are these values that they are embedded in Vision 2020's nine strategic challenges, as are those of mature democracy, caring society and innovation. Only by being inclusive and participative can the various sectors of our society be productively engaged. It follows that all forms of extremism, chauvinism, racism and isolationism must be guarded against. They must be soundly sanctioned socially, politically and, if necessary, also legally.

Sixth, nation-building is a process rather than an outcome. When Malaysia started off fifty years ago, there were no examples to study. There were no manuals to follow. Mistakes were made and, to a greater or lesser extent, lessons have been learned. While a sense of impatience is perhaps fully understandable, nation-building takes place over a period of time and only with persistence. Where there is no trust, trust has to be built. Where there is

no cooperative network, one has to be established. Building on layers of foundation is the only way to ensure that the process is solid and sustainable.

Seventh, the political, social and economic incentives must reward good behaviour and penalise bad. I know that this statement is virtually self-evident, but it is a fact that many countries are as likely to punish good behaviour as to reward it. After all, if there are benefits for corruption, then there is a real cost to being honest. The incentives for building up a nation must be greater and more compelling than breaking it down. The price of racial and cultural intolerance must be made prohibitively high.

I believe fostering national unity is the responsibility of every Malaysian. However, schools, institutions of higher learning and sports centres have a very special role to play. This is because the sense of national unity is best inculcated in the young. Through textbooks, sports and interaction, educators should eliminate ethnic stereotypes. Through the imaginative teaching of the history of Islamic, Chinese and Indian civilisations, educators could foster greater understanding among different ethnic groups.

It is said that it takes a village to raise a child. I believe this is true. To me, the village comprises three main institutions - family, school and community. From birth we should be taught to respect and honour each other's culture and heritage. Learning to interact with others is part of this process. Playing with children of other races on the playground and in friends' homes, we learn to go beyond the colour lines early in life. In school, we should be taught about other cultures and beliefs under the same roof as others of different ethnic groups - once again cutting through the colour lines.

I am aware that there are many Malaysians who are deeply troubled at the state of national unity in this country. What I have tried to do today is disabuse you of the notion that there are any 'quick fix' solutions in nation-building. If you look closely enough at any country, even ones that are regarded today as highly successful such as Japan, you will find there have been episodes in its past where events were very tenuous. I hope we will do our best to guard against cynicism and hopelessness. And I hope we will all stay the course. Failure, may I remind you all, is a costly option.

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