

The alternative is the only way
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The Ahmad Ismail - Koh Tsu Koon episode has exposed Barisan Nasional's true colours in terms of racial unity - they have none. I think BN's accusation of Pakatan Rakyat's marriage of convenience now echoes loudly back at them.

There has never been room for true racial integration in Barisan Nasional's communal politics. Each of its main component parties are only together to further each others' personal and communal interests and in this sort of formula, it is hard to imagine BN being the way forward for our nation building and the development of a united Bangsa Malaysia.

It is probably a very human thing, that is, a fallen human thing to reject the others. It is very natural to have a sense of rejection of people who are different from us.

There is an unconscious but powerful inclination to isolate ourselves from those who do not share in our commonality - to differentiate between 'us' and 'them' - and the most basic of human commonality is our culture and race, the categories we were born into.

How many times have we had a deep suspicion of other people from another racial group? How often we hear in jealousy of stories about the advantages the others received solely on the basis of their skin colour?

But now, the question we need to ask ourselves as Malaysians - Malay Malaysians, Chinese Malaysians, Indian Malaysians, Iban Malaysians, Kadazan Malaysians - in these critical and defining moments of our nation: Is this the way forward?

I am convinced that the alternative is the only way, that is, in terms of politics, we need a whole new political agenda which must promise to divorce itself from the question of race.

Can we find in our shared experience as a Nation, 51 years and beyond (one must remember Malay, Chinese, Indian and other indigenous groups' interactions in Malaysia go deeper into our history than just half a decade ago), a common value to sustain a common destiny?

I propose three considerations as the starting point of our search for such value:

Firstly, from our common history as a nation. We have interacted with one another, going way back to the medieval times, possibly even earlier. Have we not learnt to live with each other after centuries of interactions?

Our languages, our cultures and customs are so intertwined that we have more affinity with one another than we can imagine. And then again, there is ample evidence to show that the founding fathers of our nation had meant for the establishment of an independent, democratic and equitable Malaysia (then Malaya).

In such a nation, all of us will have hearts for the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed. There is no place for the spurious call for communal unity such as that called by Umno over and against the total well-being of our race as one nation, Bangsa Malaysia.

We must come to realise by now that even as our history and cultures are intertwined, the destiny of Malay Malaysians are inseparable from the destiny of Chinese Malaysians and the destiny of Indian Malaysians cannot be divorced from the destiny of Iban or Kadazan Malaysians, to paraphrase and contextualise the words of Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

Secondly, from the common strands in our religious traditions. The Quran bluntly expressed God's intention in the creation of different races of human beings: "O' mankind, We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another" (The Quran 49:13).

I am no expert of the Quran but commentators have taken the verse to be an injunction to practice human brotherhood. The Bible as well showed us the examples of Jesus Christ in welcoming all and sundry, the marginalised, the oppressed and the minorities into his friendship.

There were exaltation of peacemakers, people who not just love peace, but who actively promote and make peace. There were injunctions to love, to love our neighbours, despite them being very different from us, and even to the extent of loving our enemies.

In saner lights of interpretation, it seemed that to welcome and to love a fellow human being is not only encouraged but these are no less religious duties. If we can find in our religious traditions strands of the golden rule, and we know we can as has been demonstrated by Professor Hans Kung's Global Ethics, we should be able to find the spiritual strength to commit ourselves to racial reconciliation.

Thirdly, and perhaps going back to the most basic of our being, our common humanity. It is easier to reject others when we put them in antagonising camps, when we cease to think of them as merely humans and put them in categories.

Can we escape from these little boxes of communalism which some unscrupulous politicians want to put us in by their rhetorics? Can we rise above the categories they tried to force on us and see one another not merely as the labels we were forced to wear, but as fellow human beings?

I believe we can, if we try hard enough. After all, our affinity as human beings surpassed all other little categories. Each of us have one life, we tear, we laugh, we love, we hate, we feel pain, we fall sick and having one life, we will soon pass on from here.

We can choose to see the other person as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban and Kadazan and thus risk perceiving him/her as something less than a human being. Or we can choose to see them as fellow human beings, who like us, wish to be treated with dignity and respect deserved as part of the human family.

Malaysians of all races must do better than Ahmad and Barisan Nasional for that matter, and there can be no better time. We can choose to play into the game Ahmad and BN-Umno want us to play, that is, to be instigated against one another. But I am convinced that the alternative is the only way.

"It is absolutely important for the Malays to obtain closer ties with the other people in this country. It is time for us to take the view wider than the kampung view. I ask of you, which will you choose? Peace or chaos, friendship or enmity?" - Onn Jaafar

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