

What 'Obamania' can do for us
Malysiakini.com
Oct 7, 2008
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The day the world has been waiting for with bated breath has arrived. Today, Barack Obama stands in the eyes of the world as the first non-white president of the United States of America, putting the country on the right track to making history.

'Obamania' has indeed swept the world. But what is it about the election that made it a hot topic, especially in Malaysia?

As rightfully put by our Foreign Minister, Rais Yatim, Obama's victory shows that "Americans can accept a leader regardless of colour, religion or belief".

Barack Obama, president of the United States of America. However, while the world applauds Obama's victory, right here in Malaysia, we continue to be served with news and ideas that re-emphasise race and religion.

Recently, the appointment of Low Siew Moi as the acting General Manager of PKNS drew a series of protests and condemnation from Umno. At the same time, an Umno leader was slammed for criticising the race-based policies of the current administration.

Those contemplating a review of the social contract in light of the nation's 51st anniversary were also threatened. Indeed, threats and warnings by those desperate to maintain their hold on power have become common in this so-called multi-cultural and multi-religious country.

Sad is the fate of this nation that celebrates the victory of Obama in the absence of similar aspirations and hopes. While we continue to read excuses from our leaders not to ape the west, we slowly slip into the political framework of some notorious regimes in Africa.

The Obama victory is revolutionary, to say the least. Americans have demonstrated to the world what really matters in choosing a person to lead a nation.

Vision, leadership and a person's ability to lead and serve their nation objectively took precedent. Obama's victory showed how the entire notion of race, religion and colour stand irrelevant in real politics.

What are the elements that brought about this shift, especially in a nation that just few years ago, re-elected the controversial George Bush? The answer is simple: Americans came together as a nation based on a new ideal of nationalism, patriotism and national identity.

The new ideals of justice, freedom and rights have become the new imagination of a nation.

Nationalism, patriotism and national identity

Can Malaysia one day free itself from its own shackles and embrace merit, credibility and ability beyond race and religion as benchmarks? For that, we need to re-visit our own interpretation of nationalism, patriotism and national identity.

For the past 51 years, the government has hijacked the concept of patriotism for its own agenda. We have heard ideas that patriotism ranges from displaying the biggest national flag at your residence to the blind acceptance of governmental decisions.

The concept of patriotism is based on an idea that suggests a state of oneness and equality. Traditionally, nations were built on the basis that they are composed of peoples that share a common origin, culture, tradition and sometimes language, which could then form the basis of national identity.

In today's context, however, national identity and patriotism cannot be built on the crude pillars of language, religion and culture alone. Patriotism and national identity are not just pledging allegiance to our nation, voting, displaying the flag or being a member of the armed forces.

It is an act of devotion to what the country stands for, fundamental freedom and social justice.

Malaysia as a historical narration has developed a sense of nation based on blood and ancestry. The nation was 'racialised' through a belief in a common pre-historic origin, which at the same time, aimed to produce an intense sense of collective oneness among all the other races.

In the context of Malaysia, ethnicity is generally regarded as a cultural phenomenon based on a common language and history, and race is understood as the political characteristic of the nation building a very strong interpretation of nationalism, popularly referred to as ethnic nationalism.

Ethnic nationalism is the belief that one can only belong to a nation if one is of the correct blood, ie, race. This creates a feeling of commonality, bringing people with similar backgrounds ethnicities, and cultures together, ostensibly for the betterment of the nation.

Ethnic nationalism has also enhanced collective consciousness and internal solidarity against all perceived external threats, both justified and unjustified, and has ironically served Malaysia's modernisation and nation-building projects.

The combination of myth, ethnic nationalism and national pride are also often used to manufacture consent and impose domination.

It is imperative that nationalism is re-looked in the context of current challenges and ideals as the concept itself was suspected of interpretation of fascist ideals and power, done purely in the context of maintaining power.

Old ideas, new concepts?

The concept of nationalism must today reflect more democratic ideals and fundamental freedoms and incorporate diversity in line with the growing awareness and aspirations of society.

Let today be the day we interrogate what the country represents. Let's interrogate and share the rights and privileges of our citizenship that have been imperiled by exploitation, racism and sexism.

We have reached a juncture where we, as citizens of Malaysia must rethink and reclaim the country's direction and steer it to the direction of principles and values. Let's stop imagining a nation ruled by a particular religion but work towards a just and democratic country.

The idea of a nation is not merely symbolism but a representation of our dreams and visions.

Its time for us to also put aside the suspicions and fears we have against each other that have been instilled by our leaders. We must free ourselves from narrow political agendas and embrace a common goal for justice, freedom and democracy.

Let's sharpen our words, our arguments, our music, our paintings and our minds, be it in our office, home, village, school or street. Let's declare a war on racism, xenophobia and discrimination no matter who it affects and stop the ideas from creeping into our society at all cost.

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