

Have we forgotten Malaysia?
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With Merdeka Day round the corner, much preparation is being made for fireworks display, speeches being crafted exhorting unity and nice dresses tailored for those who will preside over the national day parade.

But the feeling on the ground is, at best, hollow. Many feel Merdeka has less meaning than the politicians would like us to believe. They may exhort us to be '1Malaysia' but words are cheap.

At this time of recession, most Malaysians are worrying how to put food on the table, whilst the political landscape looks increasingly divisive with very little to celebrate.

Perhaps it might help us find our way again if we pondered on the words of Tunku Abdul Rahman.

On Malaysia day, the Tunku said: "We can feel proud indeed of the way we have created Malaysia through friendly argument and compromise. The spirit of co-operation and concord is living proof of the desire we share for a common destiny."

A common destiny is the cornerstone of membership in any country. Perhaps we take citizenship for granted because most of us are born Malaysians. But for those who are hoping to become citizens, membership of a common Malaysian destiny is their principal hope, and rightly so.

Why is inter-ethnic cooperation seen in such negative light in certain quarters? If PAS and DAP can cooperate and reach a satisfactory compromise, it proves the point. There is no need to sell out Islam, or traditional Chinese or Hindu cultures. Umno, MCA and MIC could do the same if they had the will.

The old 'divide and rule' recipe

For most Malaysians, to see political parties that were once at polar opposites sitting down and talking is a good thing. For the Tunku, friendly argument and compromise is "living proof of the desire we share for a common destiny."

But for their political opponents, PAS and DAP talking at the same table seems to be anathema. Why do they feel threatened? Perhaps BN is pinning its hopes on that old colonial recipe of "divide and rule."

If Malaysia has evolved its own special political arrangement that involves two sets of inter-ethnic coalitions then Tunku's vision for Malaysia is a success.

By now, claims in certain quarters that the Malays would lose power and that "pork would be sold openly in the streets of Shah Alam" is blatant scare-mongering. In fact, if Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah is correct, these are the cries of a party clutching at straws. Malays will always have a majority, however you divide the votes, especially in the vast rural areas, and their needs will always hold sway.

It is true that some Malaysians have yet to understand the sensitivities of each ethnic or

religious group, but we will not get there if politicians refuse to address issues openly.

Put nation before narrow interests

If Umno and BN want to win back the electorate, they must exhibit the wisdom and magnanimity of the Merdeka generation. They must be bold enough to build consensus across the political divide. They must demonstrate a willingness to put nation before narrow sectarian interests.

The government has recently decided that Maths and Science will be taught in Bahasa Malaysia. It should go one step further and broker nationwide consensus on a single school system for the whole country. We cannot keep talking about national unity yet divide our children the moment they enter school.

On the economic front, the government has devised several stimulus packages to help Malaysians cope with the global downturn. In the West, all hopes of a quick recovery are fast evaporating. Will we be able to survive a prolonged recession? It is evident that even when the economy begins to pick up, it will be a long time before it is felt by ordinary people in the form of new jobs. Meanwhile much can be done for those made redundant, by government initiatives in skills-upgrading.

Turning to another deep concern for ordinary people, there seems little positive to say about the much-trumpeted MACC. It might be wise to look at how Hong Kong tackled the problem of systemic corruption, especially within their police force.

The ICAC there went through a baptism of fire when it began its work. We can only hope that the government here has the wisdom to put national interests ahead of party ones. When we see BN parliamentarians exposing themselves to obvious criticism, it is strange that the MACC remains so inactive.

Islam, with its core values of honesty, brotherhood, respect for humanity and custodianship over the environment, could not, and should not be used by anyone for divisive political gains. It is truly sad that one newspaper chose to accuse certain parties of "insulting" Islam, whilst publishing photographs of scantily-clad women on other pages. Such shallow hypocrisy is pathetic.

As we celebrate Merdeka this year, it might be opportune for politicians to think beyond the next general election. The Tunku had a long vision for Malaysia. Our country is to be a model of democracy and ethnic harmony. It was never meant to be a one-party state dominated by one ethnic group.

Rather, Malaysia should be where the "spirit of co-operation and concord is living proof of the desire we share for a common destiny".

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