

# Time to defend Malaysia for the Malaysians

WHEN I first read the statement by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak about the post-Merdeka generation being unappreciative of the country's history and easily influenced by Western liberal ideology, I thought he was talking about me. It was early in the morning, and my mind still groggy, susceptible to the influence of my ego.

By the time the coffee kicked in however, I realised that such an important person probably has better things to do with his time than read this column and comment on it. I also remembered that I'm not influenced by Western liberal ideology.

Later, it occurred to me that when he reportedly said, "these post-Independence kids do not realise that racial harmony today did not happen on its own," he might be giving advice to members of his own political party.

My concern for this country isn't inspired by Western-style liberalism nor Eastern-style whatever. To be honest, my political awakening, like many of my generation, was the result of the Anwar Ibrahim saga in 1998, and I take inspiration from more Malaysian



leaders than Western ones.

I've read books concerning the history of this country, including those by Rehman Rashid, K. Das, Patrick Keith and others. They explained to me why Malaysia is the way it is today, more than anything I ever learned in school. I'm not claiming to be a historical expert, but neither am I completely unappreciative of the country's history.

What I do know is that Malaysians, including those born before Merdeka, have been consistently calling for the repeal of certain laws for decades now. So while young people like myself like to think everything begins with us, we have to admit we were beaten by those before us. So the call for a more transparent and democratic society can hardly be the sole domain of youth influenced by Western ideology.

It is certainly timely to ponder these issues — after all, tomorrow is the 49th Merdeka. No doubt a time for celebration, but the commemoration of the fruition of a tough struggle should also be a time to remind ourselves to continue our efforts to realise the nation envisioned all those years ago. The danger is in mistaking Merdeka as simply a time to be nostalgic and wave flags.

Malaysia, after all, *is* a work in progress, and democracy a conversation. For better or worse, Malaysia is inevitably a multi-multi nation, made up of many cultures, religions, ethnicity and languages. The basis for our nation is enshrined in our Constitution, which can be amended, but should only be done so consensually. Until that is the case, however, that's the document we are all bound by.

If it is true that the young take the past for granted, then it is equally tragic to take the future in the same way. This is what worries some of us. And when I say us, I don't know if it's a hundred, a million, or, uh, just me, but there's a sense that the multicultural nature of our society is no

longer as prized as it should be. Multiculturalism is being stigmatised, when racism and social inequality are the true enemies.

My disappointment with all the race talk lately lies not so much with what was said, but the fact that people still fall for that kind of talk. Someone says something, another side defends, and both end up looking like champions of their respective communities. This has happened many times in the past. It's hard to blame politicians for committing themselves to certain communal causes when it's what Malaysians still want. If it wasn't, it wouldn't work. I mean, if I wanted to move up the political ladder, I wouldn't promise a further hike in petrol prices. That would be political suicide. Playing the race card, however, isn't.

This Merdeka, maybe it is time to demand for leadership that will not pander to the basest of our feelings like mistrust and selfishness, but someone who will find what is great about us, and use that as the framework of our co-operation. You know, something like what the founding fathers of this nation did.

When I say it's time for us to move beyond laws that stifle democracy and open debate, I am inspired by the talk of Malaysians having a First World mentality, something mooted by our Prime Minister himself.

And when I say I long for a day when we find a new political paradigm, where pandering to narrow communal interests is frowned upon by everyone, I don't think I'm influenced by the West. Instead, I suspect it has to do with the whole Bangsa Malaysia idea constantly being thrown about. Don't look at me, I didn't come up with it.

If after almost 50 years, we're not getting any closer to that coveted goal (some might even say we've drifted even further apart), then we have to admit that nation building hasn't been effective as hoped. If so, it is time to address this. There are already too many people defending their respective races and religions. What we need are more people defending Malaysia. Selamat Hari Merdeka.

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