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Towards a renewal of national unity

An increasingly heated public debate on race and religion in recent years has created much concern. This has prompted Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin to suggest a closed-door dialogue process beginning with the Barisan Nasional. He spoke to **ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD** on how the end result of this process could be a renewed national consensus anchored on the current social contract, but updated to strengthen the foundation of Malaysia for the future

Q: Why the need for a closed door forum on "sensitive" issues?

A: I feel this is the right time, after 50 years' of independence. There have been many developments over the past five decades that warrant us looking back at what our founding fathers agreed upon; that in order for Malaysia — Malaya at the time — to be independent and succeed, there must be a certain degree of understanding on what this nation is all about. It was reflected in the very principles they stood for and promulgated in the Constitution.

But over the past 50 years, there have been many changes in the landscape of our country. We're also seeing a transition from a

pre-independence to a post-independence generation. A big cohort are those born after Merdeka, as well as a post-New Economic Policy generation, all of whom make up the population of Malaysia today.

We are a dynamic nation, and things change and evolve. There has been a major shift in thinking on matters of importance: How the Malaysian Malay thinks, how the Malaysian Chinese thinks, how the Malaysian Indian thinks, how all Malaysians think when we talk about our society today.

Q: What are some of the current problems you've observed?

A: After much thought, I suggested that maybe the time has come for us to sit down and talk. I'm con-

cerned about some trends, including when certain leaders, whether in the Barisan Nasional or outside, speak on an issue that could be of interest to their own race. There is always some immediate counter response. Such as "Why are you talking about this? This is not 50 years ago. Times have changed."

The best example is if Umno were to suggest that we wanted to reconstitute the NEP. Many from other component Barisan Nasional parties would say "I think this should not be raised again, because that time is over and now we should go on the basis of equality, human rights, and that we're all Malaysians; so why do we need to have that sort of thing?"

Another example is when we talk about religion, always one of

the bigger sensitive areas right now. Some would say, "We have agreed on this matter already, why do you want to raise it now?"

Classic examples are court cases reported in the newspapers about Hindus who convert to Islam and pass away, and then the family claims the body. There is a big debate. Then there is the issue related to the syariah court's jurisdiction.

There are issues related to human rights and Western values. There are people who are not too Western-oriented but feel that maybe those should be the values that we should adopt if we want to be progressive.

There are also some very prominent people who speak of equality and freedom of speech and human rights, but are not ex-

ploring how it should be managed in a multicultural, multi-ethnic context.

Q: How serious is this divergence of views?

A: We've managed the situation, but they are not well managed. We've contained the situation, but solutions were "one-offs". Something else can popup again; we've just been dealing with these issues as we go along.

I'm saying all this not to frighten people into thinking that we have reached a certain state of emergency, that now requires this sort of dialogue or forum. But before we arrive at that very serious situation, why don't we sit down and freely but under a controlled atmosphere, just talk.

First among Umno, then the BN. I know this might take time, because various areas of conflict could be there, but it's okay. We should say what we feel we want to say. So long as we always bear in mind that we not only represent the various races in Malaysia, but also that, at the end of the day, whether we like it or not, there must be co-existence between the various races and the various religious groups.

Q: How can this discussion take place?

A: What I'm trying to propose — which will have to go through the BN leadership — and I'm just doing this as a person who is one of the leaders in Umno, is that we sit down without any pre-conceived ideas, without being too restrictive to protect our group's interests, and talk as Malaysians.

I strongly believe the principles our founding fathers set up are still current and relevant even today. But somehow there has been a shift in the mind-set of Malaysians. And there are two ways we can approach this shift.

One, we only deal with the problem when we face it. It's ad hoc, and some of the issues we see playing out from time to time are things we have not managed well.

Or, we could sit down, set proper parameters to discuss, what subjects, lay out a number of areas — such as Malay privileges, education system, economic standing of Malays, or position of Islam — and we develop a common stand.

Q: And the result of this would be, as you put it, to renew the "national consensus"?

A: Yes. I've thought about it. What was agreed upon by our founding fathers must be kept. It was consensus based on the spirit of give and take, mutual respect, and acknowledging each other's interests, while bearing in mind what needs to be done to ensure that, while there is unity in our diversity.

And the role of leadership to me is important. There is a tendency now for some politicians to play to the gallery, to take a populist stand on issues because that would make them popular or make them be seen as the hero of their race. We can see that in Umno, MCA, MIC, and in the opposition, because at the end of the day they want votes.

But the core issue is not addressed. You deal only with issues of the day. Maybe the problem will crop up again.

Q: But what does "renewed national consensus" mean?

A: New does not mean totally brand new, as in we start over from scratch. This (process) is all dependent on being legal and constitutional. It must be rational and reasonable. There are very complex issues to address.

The thing is, if we were to think as Malaysians, while we need at the same time to preserve the interests of our followers, then how do we work out a consensus? Does

Muhyiddin's suggestions

● A closed door dialogue to discuss sensitive issues, beginning with the Barisan Nasional, then expanded to public interest groups;

● Discussions would be on a set of identified topics and parameters. Examples could include Malay privileges, the country's education system, the economic standing of Malays and the position of Islam;

● Prominent individuals, like elder statesmen and community leaders, able to rise above communal interest and speak as Malaysians, could be roped into the dialogue process for input;

● The goal will be to develop a common stand — a "renewed national consensus", anchored on the national social contract and Constitution.

it mean that one would have to compromise for the sake of the other?

We already have an agreement in the Constitution that's become part of the whole system. No one would want to change that. I would be the last to say "Let's change the Constitution".

This is not about re-negotiating on things already agreed upon. It is to re-emphasise what is already there, while at the same time to rationalise to the younger generation why things are such, why certain things were put in the Constitution.

I am also not suggesting that we re-examine the social contract. It is important that we continue to hold on to the social contract.

What I am suggesting is that we renew the national consensus so that we can strengthen the principles which are contained in the Constitution, so that whatever it is that we agreed upon back then can still be held by the generation today, for continued peace, progress and national security.

Q: Some of the disagreements would perhaps require changes to laws, policy adjustments, and long-term awareness campaigns to fully resolve. Would the outcome of this dialogue be wide enough to pave the way for this?

A: I don't want to go into the micro aspects — to the exact laws and rules. I would want to emphasise the founding principles of our country. And later on, if need be, because of the understanding we can achieve, of course, if there are certain aspects that need to be enhanced, updated, or reviewed, that can be done later. But first we need to come to areas where we can agree on.

Q: Why does this process need to start within the BN?

A: Because we are the leaders of all the races. We would be a good place to start. But there's no reason that this should be limited just to the BN. We are not talking about a BN formula but a national formula.

So it has to go beyond the BN, to include non-governmental organisations, civil society, groups in Sabah and Sarawak, even the opposition. Because what we're looking at is beyond party interests. It's a bigger, Malaysian interest.

Another point is the need to en-

gage young people. Whatever consensus we reach will not be representative if we don't engage young leaders. They do not have the baggage of the past but they will be the leaders of Malaysia in the future, whether they're in the BN or not.

They should be engaged in a way that they can appreciate the complexities of the issues, what's been agreed upon by our founding fathers, the pillars of this nation, but at the same time how to deal with issues of the future.

They make up a large cohort of the population. If these critical issues are not placed in the minds of our young leaders, there will be problems.

Q: You made your suggestion for this dialogue process at an Umno division meeting recently. With Umno the backbone of the BN, would there be room to take this suggestion to the party's assembly this November?

A: As one of the leaders of Umno, I would like to stress the possibility that we could start this. I know some are wondering why we are talking about this now, but if the Umno supreme council feels that this is something important and critical then, of course, let's move. The BN component parties could also deliberate it.

I don't want people to misunderstand this suggestion. I think many have a broad understanding but there must be unity in thinking. Because there will be people saying that this idea for a forum is for the benefit of certain groups of people, or because there is a party election coming up (next year), or that it is just for Umno or the MCA. There are people who are sceptical about this.

So at one stage, it would probably be a good idea to identify several individuals able to rise above, who can speak as Malaysians, and I think there are some people who can do this.

I don't want to name names, but these people — elder statesmen, very established people, community leaders — can be brought in so that we can pick their brains on this, because they could represent the views of the population.

I believe, even in Umno, people will say "Why is Muhyiddin talking about this now? Does he want to campaign or what?" I'm just taking advantage of the position we're in.

Maybe it's time for us to sit down. Our prime minister mentioned once that as we celebrate 50 years' of independence, we need to look ahead to what Malaysia should be in the next 50 years. Under our prime minister's leadership, as someone who represents the interests of every race, he towers above and sees the need to deal with this at a higher level. So maybe we should sit down and discuss and establish what we could call a renewed consensus.

Q: How do you view incidents in recent years where some politicians make statements that hurt the feelings of other communities, or publicly differ with each other despite being on the same side?

A: Many people have observed this in the last few years. It could be because there's more pressure being put on political leaders to accept views of certain groups of people, and there is the tendency of some politicians to go along with the views of certain groups because they feel if they don't they will not be seen as fighting for the cause of their own race and in the end they will lose votes.

Populist, rather than going head-on to defend something if they believe that it is what all Malaysians must stand for, which may not make you more popular but it will sink into the minds of most Malaysians that "this guy has got some brains because he's looking beyond".

That's the reason why I think this should start as a BN initiative. Then it will work on the minds of people, and they can see for themselves, "Wow! The BN leadership itself now recognises the need to look into these things instead of sweeping things under the carpet."

I recognise that this is not an easy thing. But at the end of the day, what do you want to see? You want to see a Malaysia that's united, peaceful and progressive. None of it can happen if our value system crumbles just because of some misunderstanding or failure to give and take.

This is the concern — that we have built up Malaysia into what it is today, but after 50 years, people forget what has been laid down. And if this foundation is not reinforced, it weakens. We don't need much to ignite things. Just a spark and whatever we've built could be damaged.

Q: What's been the response to your suggestion?

A: There's been a positive response from a number of BN leaders. Of course, this cannot move unless there is the green light (from the BN leadership) to sit down and discuss. I'll have to speak to the prime minister to allow this sort of dialogue to start and to discuss who should be involved and who should moderate. There are complex issues, so we need to adopt an open mind because what we want is to talk about establishing a foundation for Malaysia for the future.