

# PM: Panel should discuss racial unity sincerely

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**PUTRAJAYA:** Fifty years after independence, Malaysians are still engaged in vigorous debate about national unity. But, instead of looking at it negatively, the country should be proud of the fact that inter-ethnic and national unity is still the top priority for its citizens, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said yesterday.

In an off-the-cuff speech to newly-appointed members of the National Unity Advisory Panel, Abdullah tracked the country's transformation from a newly-independent nation of diverse races to the bloody riots of May 13 in 1969, and the current state of inter-ethnic and religious relations in the country.

There was pin-drop silence as he spoke, and at the end of his speech, he received a standing ovation from the audience comprising senior civil servants, entrepreneurs, academics, student leaders, politicians and former members of the uniformed services.

Connecting with the audience by referring to individual panel members such as Tan Sri Ramon

Navaratnam, a former senior civil servant, and New Straits Times Press Berhad chairman Datuk Seri Jawhar Hassan, a former director-general of the National Unity Department, and his own shared experiences in unity discussions with them, Abdullah said the only way to perpetuate unity was for Malaysians of all races and religions to be involved in every aspect of Malaysian life.

"They must be together in politics, in government, in school. That's the way it was (when Malaysia was formed) and that's the way it should be."

His advice to the 55-member panel was: "Have the right attitude, be sincere, be pragmatic but don't sweep the issues under the carpet. And most of all, you must first love your country."

Abdullah said dialogue must continue and be broadened for this was one sure way of fostering unity to ensure that Malaysia remained peaceful and stable.

The prime minister reminded panel members that they had a responsibility to the future. He said they must have the right attitude and be sincere during discussions.

"Discuss issues with the aim of ensuring that you can come up with suggestions to strengthen

unity and prevent racial conflict.

"Overzealousness is not good but being too cautious will not help either. We must be pragmatic and clear. We must be sincere in implementation in order to succeed. We want Malaysia to remain safe and stable."

Abdullah said the people would feel safe and protected if unity continued to prevail.

"We do not want to fail as a nation because of racial conflict. Our future will be better and, God willing, we can achieve the developed nation status by 2020. We will be able to move ahead with confidence and our grandchildren will be able to celebrate Malaysia's 100th anniversary of independence."

Abdullah pointed out that in the aftermath of May 13, a National Operations Council (of which he was a member) was formed and that it comprised politicians, non-governmental organisations and community leaders of all races.

"The council acted as a forum that enabled all members to discuss openly racial issues and other matters concerning unity. There was once, I remember, when (the late) Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman (former deputy prime minister) said, 'Let's not sweep everything

under the carpet... the government is not always right. There are cases where incorrect decisions were made'.

"I remember this vividly... he was so open and pulled no punches," he said, adding that Ismail had then pleaded against a recurrence of the May 13 incident and all Malaysians of that time could not have agreed any less after having undergone the trauma of the racial riots.

He said Ismail's message was clear — inter-racial relations, tolerance and understanding must be strengthened.

Abdullah also touched on the contributions of former prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein who was instrumental in mooting the tenets of Rukun Negara and the National Economic Policy which was aimed at eradicating poverty, regardless of race, as well as restructuring society.

He said through the NEP, the identification of race with economic functions was erased.

Abdullah later presented appointment letters to panel members, some of whom were reappointed for another term, while others were serving their first two-year term.