

Middle ground is where unity lies

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AS rainstorms and floods ushered in 2007, what would otherwise have occupied the headlines was taking place in Cebu.

Asean leaders had flocked to this island paradise to discuss Southeast Asian integration and preach cultural and economic unity.

To the casual observer at home, however, such grandiose ambitions articulated abroad would belie the difficulties we face in our own backyard.

Are we truly a shining example of integration to our neighbours?

Sadly, there is a dearth of evidence that we are. Last year's headlines easily testified to this: No single topic was as prominent throughout as race relations.

This is not necessarily a bad thing; only it was deliberated less than it was employed to charge populist emotions. As a result, discussion was more spiteful than objective, and continued to juxtapose polar groups in an eternal conflict.

If 2006 showed that we cannot transcend our reactionary impulses to discuss our future, then how can we possibly expect the same at a regional level?

Most importantly, what does this say about the nature of our democratic society 50 years into Merdeka?

Of course, an integrated Asean Community is more easily said than done because of the caveat of non-interference in each other's affairs.

Non-interference is fast becoming a stick-in-the-mud when Asean neighbours discuss the haze, labour migration, oil or water. Here the similarity with our own problems begins.

A Malaysian analogy of non-interference is found in the organisation of politics into racially defined groups to the exclusion of each other.

In 1957, this was a pragmatic formula, because separating communities moderated conflict, but allowed co-operation between community leaders.

Today, it is less so, as it is increasingly out of sync with the dynamics of a once-segmented society that has since coalesced.

In the 1950s, the communal demographics of language, religion, ancestral origin and the traditions of kampung or *kongsi*, made it natural for, say, the average Hakka miner, whose only dealings with the Malays concerned some trade for food or supplies, to identify his livelihood with a community of fellow Chinese.

Such circumstances do not always apply anymore because our communal geographies have since overlapped so extensively and at so many levels.

On the contrary, contact between communities no longer necessarily implies a conflict.

Indeed, our founding fathers had far-sightedly conceived of this development, envisioning the day when interaction would no longer be destructive.

Until we ourselves can collectively comprehend this fact — truly the fruit of our country's coming of age — we will remain trapped in our myopic communal mindsets, cutting off our

Comment

By
Ng Tze
Shiung

own noses to spite the social progress that it implies.

For these "overlaps" actually define many individuals' lives today, and these lives a significant stratum of society.

Foremost are those who turn 50 this year. Of the non-Malays, no longer are they the pre-Merdeka immigrants from Fujian or Colombo whose loyalty was once ambiguous. Instead, they know only Tanah Melayu.

Then there are the entire generations of non-Malays born immediately after 1969 (including myself) who, whether they like it or not, are undeniably also children of the New Economic Policy.

I cannot speak for the national schools of today, but those of my time remarkably gave me a multi-cultural perspective on the world.

Time has moved on since 1957 and 1969, and with it the portraits of the ordinary people of the former Malay States and Straits Settlements.

As a result, a sizeable middle portion of post-Merdeka Malaysians today are unable to empathise with the politics of race, yet ironically live in a society increasingly paralysed by it.

The Peranakan had this very experience in 1945.

They who had evolved into an integrated society and *budaya*, while all others regarded each other in ethnic terms of "us" and "them", unfortunately found themselves caught in a racial contest between protagonists with whom they could not identify.

Similarly, we who have now integrated and evolved into a modern Malaysian society, also find ourselves indifferent bystanders in a conflict orchestrated by those still unable to reach out into the future.

Indeed, I would expect modern Malaysians, stripped of their skins, to be no less homogenous in mind and spirit, and sharing a common interest defined not by any racial partisan loyalty but by the more innate qualities of character, ideas, and beliefs.

Cultural devotion will always thrive, but then again our communities have become so interdependent now that culture has lost its previous disparateness and become instead distinct attributes of a broader Malaysianness.

I, for example, naturally find more affinity with the Malay woman who holds the lift door for me than the bleach-haired Chinese youngster who recklessly drives me off the road.

Or the friendship I strike up with the Malay barista at Starbucks, as opposed to my distrust of the contractor who sells me a flawed product or service.

Similarly, I would find little that is



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appealing or rational in any political party claiming to represent, say, solely Chinese (or any equally outmoded race-specific) interests.

Most of those from my generation would consider ourselves to be modern Malaysians through and through.

Unfortunately, however, the path towards which self-serving politicians now appear to be bringing this country and its youth is rapidly diverging from that original path which we knew.

Where then are we to locate the middle ground which the modern Malaysian treads?

Or does the middle ground and the modern Malaysian, once so vital to the formula upon which the Alliance and our national existence were founded, no longer count 50 years on in the story of Malaysia?

Has that great breed of Malaysian centrists ended with the likes of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Dr Ismail, and Tan Sri Khir Johari?

Hence, we come to the root of 2006's winter of discontent: Should our nation-building continue to follow the institutional model upon which 1957 was based, or do we let it adopt the mono-ethnic suit it first acquired in 1969?

Certainly, the lessons of history, if not our plural demography, would favour the former and reject the latter.

One, for example, cannot fail to admire the French football team at the 2006 World Cup, comprising children of France's former African colonies who proudly donned the tri-colours in the true spirit of *la vie en bleu*.

A way of life, no less, founded upon democratic principles and institutions instead of race, and determined

by the collective will of every individual, instead of any privileged elite.

Similarly in Indonesia's "imagined community", the Javanese priyayi, Balinese Hindu, Acehese ulama and Christian Ambonese each possess different cultures and traditions, and may not even have met each other, yet recognise a solidarity under their flag and the *pancasila*.

As we celebrate our 50th anniversary, Indonesians will celebrate their 62nd, certainly a worthy feat considering that their diverse peoples are over 220 million strong.

By contrast, only an apocalyptic fate awaited central Europe's ethnically constructed states and their insular nationalisms.

The experience of Nazi Germany is a sobering lesson for all Europeans today.

It is also ours to heed, failing which we have the horrors of yesterday's Yugoslavia to remind us what one scholar had forewarned, that "ethnic communities and groups in modern societies are fated to coexist, whatever the rhetoric which dreams of a return to an unmixed nation".

Older and wiser Malaysians who witnessed and understood 1957 can easily describe that distinct "way of life" that is Malaysia.

And at its heart, that unique multi-culturalism whose development predates even the British era (and its export of the nation state) to an ancient maritime age when settlers from Siak, Mataram, Makassar, Afghanistan, etc, arrived to join those already established in the northern territories to become the first peninsular Malays.

They will also remember how John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson once hailed our multi-cultural institution as the liberal progressive mod-

el that newly independent states should emulate, as opposed to totalitarian China and Indochina.

Ultimately, no lowest denominator for any particular race can possibly exist: The racial state is never ever a sustainable concept.

Rather we are merely the latest in an ongoing process that began with a myriad of interesting ingredients.

In continuing to categorise ourselves in so crude and general terms such as Malay, Chinese, or Indian, to the exclusion of the Dayaks, Sikhs, Portuguese and more recent arrivals of Javanese artisans and Sulu traders, we in fact only reduce the true wealth of our collective human capital.

Bangsa Malaysia, when taken literally, is antithetical to this: There is no such specific thing as a singular Malaysian race.

Considered symbolically, however, Bangsa Malaysia becomes an extraordinary concept of a plural pot of Malaysians with a plethora of ancestral origins in Pattani or Gujarat or Canton, all living and understanding the Malaysian way of life, tried and tested with varying results over 50 years.

How else did Malacca become the pre-eminent entrepot of the region before?

Half a century on, have we then squandered our unique multi-cultural heritage and allowed the intolerant minority to mislead the average Malaysians (statistically only 24.9 years old) that they are irreconcilably different from each other?

Or can we reinvigorate the strengths lying within our diversity, rediscover the tolerance and fellowship once imbued in us by Merdeka, and return to the common ground once known as Malaysia?