

The time for Onn Jaafar's idea has come

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As we approach the 50th year of our independence, there is no better moment to tell Malaysians of a plan to reinvent the politics of this country.



WHY NOT?
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MORE than 50 years ago, Datuk Onn Jaafar floated a suggestion that Umno membership be opened to the people of Malaya, irrespective of their ethnicity.

He had hoped to drive the politics of the time away from the communalist path it was taking towards a more inclusive approach.

Onn found out to his dismay that birds of a feather not only instinctively flock together, many preferred to keep it that way.

The rejection by members of a party that he was a founder and the president proved too much for Onn, who shortly after left Umno.

The idea was indeed ahead of its time.

The Malays then were primarily concerned with gaining independence for a land they called Tanah Melayu, and as the name suggests, it was a land they considered theirs, and by and large, theirs alone.

They were not yet fully exposed to the cold reality of the need for compromise that was to emerge in the period leading up to independence.

It would be several more years before the British would leave Malaysians to face the future on their own.

But soon enough, it became clear to the political parties in existence that cooperation was the only way forward.

This realisation resulted in the Alliance (and later on the Barisan Nasional) which exemplifies the unique approach of communalism tempered by compromise and restrained by the need for consensus.

Undoubtedly, it has provided long-standing stability and a platform for progress for our multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. And because it has done so for decades, the coalition in its various forms has reaped the fruits of its labour at every general election since 1955.

But the approach that has served us well is far from ideal.

It does not sit well with the colour-blind values and principles that we try to inculcate in our children and hope they uphold throughout their adult lives.

It smacks us in the face every time we complain of insensitivity on the part of people who loudly champion narrow-minded views.

And most of all, competing with each other saps us of energy that could be better expended in the competition we face as a nation on the global stage.

Malaysia will soon be 50-years strong, and all of us have grown to understand and accept that one Malaysian has just as much right as the other to call this country theirs.

We have come far, and it is time our political leaders blow the dust off Onn's initial idea and consider something similar, as suggested recently by Kota Baru MP Datuk Zaid Ibrahim.

He argues that the "diverse approaches" taken by the various Barisan component parties in handling current issues has led to "unresolved problems and confusion".

The solution is a merger of the component

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parties into a single entity.

And why not?

Unlike the Umno of Onn's time, Barisan need not start from zero if it were to seriously consider such a step.

The leaders and members of the various parties have years of experience working together, and know each other well enough for a reasonable level of trust to have been established.

The Barisan charter itself declares that the coalition "opposes all forms of religious and racial extremism, political fanaticism and parochialism, which only serve to undermine societal harmony. Let us be forewarned that those who sow the seeds of communal hatred will reap the whirlwind of destruction."

Fine words that Barisan, in numerous instances, has proven it is able to match in deed. But from time to time, the ugly head of extremism rears itself, even among the close ranks of the coalition.

Most Malaysians would agree that our unity has deteriorated in recent years, in no small part due to the emergence of several issues that seem to have exposed weaknesses in our ability and willingness to compromise.

Times like these call for a new thinking.

A merger of the Barisan component parties will force members of the new entity - especially those in office or planning to run - to see beyond narrow interests and develop a broader and more meaningful political outlook that reflects and takes into account the concerns and interests of all.

It would also move other political parties to rethink their place in Malaysian society.

Best of all, it would send a clear message to Malaysians that there exists the political will to break down our self-constructed racial barriers, which is increasingly being blamed for so many of our problems.

Understandably, there cannot be a headlong rush into such a merger. No one should underestimate the great effort it will require. And it will take time.

But as we approach the 50th year of our independence, there is no more appropriate moment to tell Malaysians that there is a plan, with targets and milestones set, to reinvent the politics of this country and finally breathe life into an idea whose time has come.

□ After more than 10 years in journalism, Raslan Sharif, *The Star Online* editor, believes open, honest discussion and debate is the best way to deal with any issue.