

A myth, but Bangsa Malaysia idea will endure

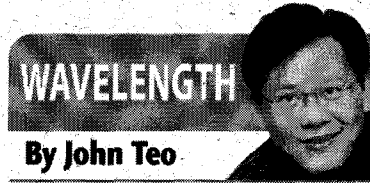
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THE funeral at St Joseph's Cathedral in Kuching of the wife of prominent Sarawak political and corporate figure, Datuk Amar Leonard Linggi Tun Jugah, on Thursday brought together an assembly of this city's political and professional classes.

Those assembled not just cut across political lines but, more significantly and perhaps best showcasing Sarawak as a beacon of tolerance, represented the whole spectrum of religious diversity for which the state is renowned. There were Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and others sprinkled among the multitude.

Sarawak is justifiably famous as a state where inter-marriage among the races is not uncommon. But, while this phenomenon has blurred rigid racial delineations, identity based on one's racial origin is still prevalent, and politics is organised, by and large, along racial lines.

With growing numbers of Sara-



wakians of mixed-race origins, one would have thought there would be increasing clamour for breaking out of the rigidities of assigned racial identities. Apparently not so.

Sarawakians of mixed parentage happily go about hyphenating themselves based on their parents' racial heritage, and presumably just as happily organise their lives around the racial categories they are officially assigned.

To these, the idea of Bangsa Malaysia is probably a practical reality, if not officially so, because there is no such racial category officially recognised as yet.

Which brings to mind the recent public debate about the very concept of Bangsa Malaysia. I am greatly heartened by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's weighing in with the view that Bangsa Malaysia is a state of mind.

I am reminded of a recent little debate with a fellow Filipino columnist when he posed the question that "isn't it normal that official talk necessarily would talk of absolutes and other great things; and that disconnected as it is from real life, isn't it necessary that, at least at that level, we talk that talk?"

Najib would fall into that category of leaders talking nobly about "absolutes and other great things". I can think of nothing more noble, absolute and great than talking up the idea of Bangsa Malaysia.

Most nations sustain themselves on highly noble goals and usually unattainable myths. The United States, for

example, sustains itself on the idea of "freedom", although the "freedom" its founding fathers fought for was freedom from colonial Britain. This is far removed from the democratic freedoms the country has evolved over two centuries.

Yet those freedoms clearly have their limits and the US has been able to expand on those limits largely because of the growing amount of resources it had been able to exploit, and not the other way round.

Most nations, even dictatorial and communist ones, also will not argue about democratic freedoms, with some going to the extent of affixing the clearly fictitious label of "democratic" to their official names.

Malaysia has gone one better. This nation will obviously also not quarrel with the very notion of democratic freedom because it is smart enough to understand that this is a myth all Malaysians have no problem buying

into. Unlike many other nations though, we not only pay lip service to the notions of democracy and freedom, but actually take concrete steps that incrementally expand on the limits that necessarily impinge on democracy and freedom.

We have done so admirably over a short half-a-century, if you ask me. Truly a triumph of unabashed pragmatism over woolly idealism. But back to Bangsa Malaysia. Here is a myth to place over and above democracy and freedom, if ever one was needed. It is incorrigibly idealistic.

It is sufficiently vague and lacking in specifics that, however our nation's future course evolves, it can stay relevant.

And it certainly beats the paroxysms of communal exclusivity and chest-beating we seem to be afflicted with depressing regularity.

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