

Q: After almost 50 years as an independent nation, do you think we have achieved progress in terms of race relations?

A: I think to a large extent we have. However, in some aspects, we may not have progressed as much as we ought to. There still appears to be some degree of mistrust in some quarters and less meaningful interaction between the races.

I remember the time when I was in school in the 1960s. I was in St John's Institution (Kuala Lumpur).

There was a sense of belonging to the school, irrespective of where we came from. During that period too, it was common practice for us to visit each other's homes and we had a sense of community.

At school, we were doing a lot of things together which, sadly, I do not see the young doing to the same extent today.

So in that sense, I feel that race relations may not have progressed. Some may even say it has regressed. This is unfortunate.

Q: Was there a specific event that caused this change?

A: It is a fact that each of us has multiple identities. For example, I am a Muslim, I am a Malay, I am a Malaysian, I am an Asian and I can go on.

For many Malaysians and for many Muslims around the world, the fact that they are Muslims has been part of their make-up for a long time. It was only after 9/11 that this became the dominant identity.

The traumatic events of May 13 triggered awareness among Malaysians of their ethnic identities.

Before May 13, while I was in school there was an awareness that you were Malay, Chinese or Indian but that was not the predominant factor in our relationships with each other.

But after that incident, our ethnic identity became the primary factor.

I am not saying there was no ethnic consciousness in our struggle for independence, but the leaders of the various ethnic groups were determined to work together. There was an understanding that unity came first.

Post-May 13, the dividing lines of race became clearer, much more than before.

Q: From May 13 until today, what actually went wrong with race relations?

A: We haven't actually gone wrong. It's just how the various races have progressed due to the polarisation after May 13, that has brought them to where they are today.

When the NEP (New Economic Policy) was formulated, there was agreement that sacrifices had to be made by all races to achieve national uni-

ty. There was a sense of economic imbalance in society, the identification of race with economic function and poverty mainly but not limited to the Malays.

Somewhere along the line, that feeling of give-and-take, gave way to the feeling that progress entailed a zero-sum game. It is very difficult to pinpoint when it happened.

Somewhere along the line, attitudes changed... people's perception changed.

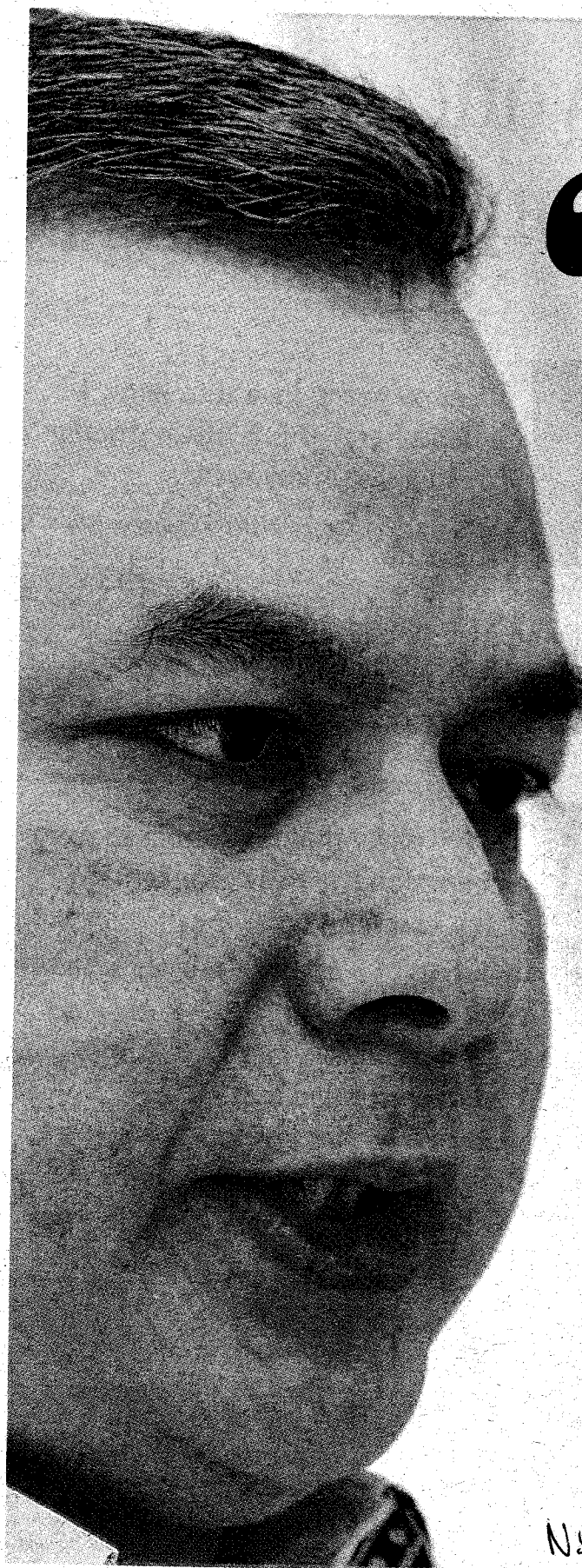
And bear in mind that Malaysia has progressed tremendously economically over the last 30 years from being primarily an agriculture

economy to a manufacturing economy and now a service-based economy.

Can you imagine if the economy had been bad? Things will be worse.

We expected race relations to improve over time because of the growing wealth of the economy. But unfortunately this has not happened. Why? This is something that really needs to be addressed and discussed.

Q: In our quest for physical development, do you think that we have lost our wisdom and common sense in forging true unity?



'We need role models to bridge racial, religious divide'

He comes with some pretty impressive credentials, a PhD in Politics and Economics from Oxford and a Master's degree in Political Economy and Government from Harvard. Raja Dr Nazrin Shah, the Raja Muda of Perak, tells WAN HAMIDI HAMID about civil society and the role of the silent majority.

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A: It would appear so, judging by what we hear and read today.

Yes, there has been much physical development over the years, something we can be proud of. I am not sure whether somewhere along the line, we have lost our uniqueness.

In this globalised world, where countries are trying to reach out to one another, we have lost sight of what we already have in this country.

Very few countries have been so blessed with such diversity. Together, the different races have contributed to make this a prosperous coun-

try, and the envy of many others. We should exploit this special feature to reach greater heights.

This comes back to the issue of leadership. By leadership, I don't mean just the prime minister. I'm talking about leadership at all levels of society.

Leaders can either appeal to our lowest, basest instincts or they can inspire us to achieve great things.

Some people feel they can achieve their ends or promote their careers by religious and ethnic posturing. In a globalising world, appeals to parochialism would be harmful to the country.

We need mature and responsible leaders and role models who are serious about bridging the divide of race and religion.

Q: We still talk of racial polarisation in schools and universities. Do you think enough is being done in these institutions to overcome the problem?

A: More needs to be done. Schools need to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

Students should not be made to feel isolated or segregated by race or belief.

Instead, there should be integration and a spirit of belonging.

There should be a more balanced racial composition of school leaders, teachers and students that reflect the national mix.

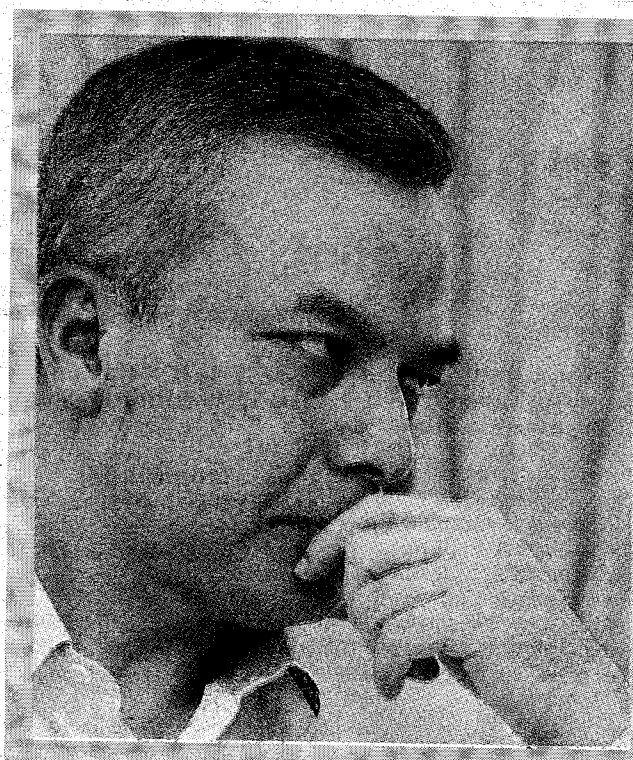
Q: Do you think the syllabus in schools is adequate or should it be revamped or reformed because it seems race and religion are creeping into the national schools now as opposed to 30 or 40 years ago?

A: The problem is perhaps not so much the syllabus, as the way subjects are taught.

Also the values we pass on to students determine their worldview.

Clearly we need to be more effective in imparting values that respect differences among people and that foster understanding and mutual respect.

Q: There have been Press



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reports about school principals and teachers who seem to be taking over the schools by not allowing certain students from bringing certain types of food to school or asking young girls to wear *tudung*. What's your comment?

A: It is a disturbing development. I have a friend whose child has been told by his teachers not to visit the homes of the non-Malays.

The child is very confused and is wondering why he can't visit his friends.

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each other. I used to do that when I was a kid.

Q: What does the word "unity" mean to you?

A: Unity to me does not mean we have to impose a strait-jacket of conformity or orthodoxy that everybody must follow. It does not mean we must all be alike, look alike, behave alike, dress alike.

To me that is not the unity that we are aiming for. Unity means having a common focus of loyalty, having shared objectives, sharing certain important values.

This can be achieved within a diverse society.

In embracing our diversity, we can achieve unity.

Q: Do you think a dominant race, religion or ideology is necessary to foster unity?

A: Definitely not. There are enough examples, in this country and in other countries, to disprove this hypothesis.

Take a look at some of our states that have a dominant ethnic group. Even these states have problems of their own.

You can also find instances of many countries where one ethnic group predominates. Yet, there is chaos and political instability.

Which goes to show that, by itself, the existence of a dominant race, religion or ideology does not guarantee unity.

More important are mutual understanding and genuine respect for each other. The recognition that we are all God's creation and that each deserves to be treated with dignity.

I strongly believe Malaysia is a much richer and interesting country because of the diversity of our population.

Q: Even a dominant religion?

A: Even a dominant religion.

If there is one country that has come into existence through religion, it is Pakistan. One would have thought that a common religion would have been able to bind East and West Pakistan together. But it did not.

Q: Besides the role of the government and politicians, what about the people's role in getting to know each other better? Do you

think we Malaysians are working hard to achieve unity?

A: As I said earlier, if we are going to achieve unity, there must be meaningful interaction among the ethnic groups at all levels of society.

These everyday forms of engagement can take many forms: playing together on the sports field, visiting each other's homes, celebrating festivals together and the like.

There is another form of engagement which we call associational. These are interactions which are more formalised, such as clubs and societies.

With engagement comes understanding, and with understanding comes acceptance and respect.

Studies have shown that where such networks of engagement exist, tensions and conflicts, when they do arise, can be better managed and resolved.

These engagements must start from young. That is why I believe it is at the primary school level, the pre-school level, that these values must be inculcated.

Q: What about the adults, with their preconceived ideas?

A: I think people are looking for role models in society. What kind of role models do we have today?

And do we have as role models people of stature, people we can look up to and respect? Adults have the responsibility to set a good example for the young.

Q: Do you believe Malaysians actually understand each other's cultures and beliefs, or are we merely confining ourselves within our own myth and misconception about our neighbours who are of different ethnicity and religion?

A: I have great faith that the majority understands and respects each other's cultures and beliefs. There is no teacher like direct personal experience.

If I play football with people of different ethnic groups, if I go to school with people of different religious backgrounds, I will come to understand more about them, their culture, their beliefs.

Many of them might even become my closest friends.

To me that is the biggest antidote to prejudice and bigotry.

There must be greater space for people to engage each other on a regular basis.

We should encourage more societies and organisations which are multi-ethnic. People will then get the

chance to interact with each other and really find out what the other person is like.

Q: In looking for role models, people actually look up to religious leaders. But there are religious leaders who say things that would not contribute to unity and even say the wrong things about other religions...

A: Role models are not limited to religious leaders. Parents and teachers are the primary role models for the young.

However, it is not right for religious leaders to presume or assume that because



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somebody is different, he or she is a threat. That is not the case.

Rather than focusing on differences, I would suggest that we highlight those areas where we share common aspirations and values. Those commonalities that bind us together as human beings.

And where there are differences, we should have the humility, generosity of spirit and intellectual curiosity to want to learn more about

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Nazrin: We can't allow minority to hijack agenda

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and understand these differences.

All religious leaders carry a heavy burden. As a Muslim, I would like Muslim leaders to show the beauty of Islam, how it respects other religions and people.

Q: When you mentioned about having more space and more associations, are you also referring to a body, similar to that of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) for race and religious issues?

A: Basically, what I am advocating is for greater space for civil society to flourish.

The opportunity for that to happen must come from the political leadership, but the initiative and drive must come from below.

I think there are enough sensible and good-natured people out there who want to do this. The silent majority. We must not allow a small minority to hijack the national agenda.

Q: It is said that it is a sad thing nowadays that leaders have to persuade the people to unite. What are your comments on that?

A: In the early days, our shared vision was to achieve Merdeka. To achieve Merdeka, the different races recognised that no single race could do it on its own. They needed each other.

The mood of unity was also accepted by the nine rulers which enabled a nation to be born.

The nine rulers came to a consensus to elect one among them to be the Yang diPertuan Agong on a rotation basis. A formula that has contributed to our success.

I think there must be recognition today that in order to achieve Vision 2020, we need each other. Neither a single ethnic group nor a single institution can achieve this Vision on its own.

Q: The bulk of the responsibility lies with those people aged between 15 and 35 now. Do you have faith in the young?

A: I have great faith in the young. In their idealism and their desire to make a difference. It is essential that this youthful idealism be carefully nurtured so that it does not turn into cynicism and opportunism.

In this regard, the importance of the right role models cannot be overemphasised.

At this impressionable age, if you point them in the wrong direction, they will go wrong.

Q: How open-minded are the Malays now compared to when you were in school?

A: How to answer this question... Well, first of all we should not only look at Malays but all ethnic groups.

Chauvinism is not only confined to the Malays.

I grew up with my grandparents in Penang.

When I was very young, a lot of my friends were from different races and I could even converse with them in Hokkien.

That early exposure to somebody from a different background helped me a lot.

Now, you can sit in the same bus-stop; you can have the Malays here, the Chinese there but there does not appear to any meaningful interaction.



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Q: It's nice to have vision but what do we do now?

A: It is time for action. Education is crucial. The inculcation of the right values is essential in molding the mindset of the next generation.

Society itself should bear greater responsibility in developing more opportunities.

Cross-cultural interaction should play a vital part in the formative years of one's informal education. This can be achieved by having more associations

which are multi-ethnic rather than mono-ethnic.

Q: What about things said by some people such as don't celebrate other people's festivities.

A: On the contrary, I would say... go forth and celebrate each other's festivities. The fact that we are so rich in our cultural diversity makes Malaysia truly unique.

If we are not able and not allowed to join together and celebrate each other's festivities, we will not only lose our uniqueness, we lose our heritage.

Q: Also some Muslim groups are demanding the religious authorities go after a certain type of biscuits that feature something that looked like a cross...

A: I am very sad that people can be so petty. These are unnecessary distractions when there are more pressing matters that deserve our attention.

Q: Do you think this is the view of the minority or slowly becoming the mainstream view among the Malays?

A: I believe the majority are sensible and level-headed. The silent majority should make their voices heard.

At the end of the day, Malays, Chinese and Indians are interested in improving their standard of living and providing a better future for their children. They will not be the victims of someone else's prejudices.

Q: Do you think the prime minister is trying hard enough to foster unity?

A: I think he is very sincere. He himself is a good role model. During the fasting month, I noticed that after performing the *terawih* prayers, he made time to attend the Deepavali celebrations.

Likewise, the Indian community showed their understanding by extending their open house celebrations till late evening to accommodate the Muslims.

In his inaugural address as prime minister, he emphasised the importance of fostering national unity, which he re-emphasised at the recent Umno general assembly.

His winding-up speech was most assuring to many Malaysians. Obviously he is trying hard, and he needs the support of all Malaysians.

That being so, I believe it is time for us to move away from excessive adulation of individuals, and focus more on institutions and institution-building, whether universities, the judiciary, civil service, etc.

Institutions provide stability and are more long-lasting.