

# A policy of basic respect

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**OUR** prime minister, in closing the Umno General Assembly earlier this month, said that leaders of a race who respect and honour the Federal Constitution must also be responsible enough to defend the rights of the non-Malays. He reminded his members that Barisan Nasional, the country's coalition government, should make decisions based on what is best for the country and its people. Indeed, one accedes to our country's premier a merit of consistency in calling for tolerance and respect for all ethnic groups alike.

Recent statements by his fellow party members have therefore been

## Comment

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more than a little confusing to the public at large, leaving the following examples ringing in our ears.

Bangsa Malaysia, a fundamental concept in espousing national unity in our multiethnic country, has been rejected in favour of limiting the definition of Malaysians to Malays being the main, or pivotal, race in the country. Leaders of Barisan Nasional component parties have been chided for

expressing their fears that the communities they represent are being sidelined. Strong and offensively racial statements have been, reportedly made in the last fortnight. An Umno leader was asked when he would use the keris some time after brandishing it at the General Assembly.

Now, such assertions are reflective of either a serious contradiction in terms of our national leaders' credo, or a gross misunderstanding of the prime minister's rhetoric of justice and respect for all.

In either case, the public is greatly puzzled as a result. It is becoming increasingly difficult to correspond Pak Lah's noble calls for tolerance and harmony with those that are in blatant disregard of the most basic respect for humanity, perhaps even falling short of being classified as seditious.

Indeed, and rightfully so, the Umno Youth chief has cautioned that stern action be taken against those who play the racial card for political gain. To the keen observer, however, it does strangely seem as if many may already have crossed the line.

## A cost to national interest

This unfortunate inconsistency has several consequences. Firstly, it brings the level of national discourse several steps down the intellectual ladder. Quality debates founded upon informed facts, and not biased opinion, should be the order of the day. A great deal more time and energy should be spent on discussion which encourages new long-term strategies feasible for the country. Instead, recent babble demonstrates that Malaysians are contentedly myopic in their obsession with race and religion.

Secondly, it shows the lack of commitment to seriously tackling issues of national development. In this age of globalisation, economic competitiveness and ideas to improve trade and investment ought to be high up in the list of discussion points. Our neighbouring countries continue to improve by leaps and bounds in foreign direct investment, whilst Malaysia slides sluggishly to 62nd place, according to the 2005 Unctad FD rankings. The quality of tertiary education, both in teaching methods and content, needs to be brought to an international level. That none of these was the key focus of the recent Umno General Assembly, the country's largest political party, is especially worrying.

Finally, if this perceived discrepancy continues, it inevitably comes at a cost to national unity – ironically enough, the primary goal that Vision 2020 sets out to achieve. The fear is that such sentiment of racial undertones, intentionally or not, would then seep to the masses. Nobody wishes for such a situation to come to pass.

## Platforms of understanding

There are, however, solutions that can be sought. Basic ground rules should be set and strictly adhered to. Statements that hint at compromising national unity in any way should be reprimanded. This should apply to all leaders in all public discussion, including parliamentary debates. Condemnatory insults of any race or religion should not be tolerated under any circumstance. In short, there should be conscious effort to move away from clamour and steadily towards rational dialogue.

Forming such common platforms of understanding is the first step forward. It should be collectively agreed that a basic level of respect for humanity, in line with Islam, is to be maintained, both in speech and in action. This agreement should not come as a result of coercion, but of willing and intentional decision by all parties. While it is true that many national policy issues will not be as quickly or easily resolved, at least one should stand tall as the benchmark against which all others are evaluated: national unity.

There is an urgent need to demonstrate that the political leadership is ready and willing to be consistent in its various policies and public statements. Failure to do so leaves the public in the dark as to which is the most accurate or sincere in nature. National interest must be seriously considered, a wake-up call that insular thinking will bring us nowhere.

If the government is serious about its philosophy of respecting and defending the rights of all races in Malaysia, then let's have less talk about theoretical notions and more action. I quote from Pak Lah, that "one of the nine thrusts of Vision 2020 is to create a mature democratic society. We have stated our desire to work towards establishing a mature, liberal and tolerant society. If we are serious about this goal, we must pursue the process of transformation with diligence." I concur.

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