

The Challenges of Multireligious, Multiethnic & Multicultural Societies

Let me begin by thanking the organisers for giving me the honour of delivering the keynote address to the inaugural Asia Media Summit. It is a pleasure to be able to speak to so many distinguished guests from the global media community. I am made to understand that there are over 400 participants from over 50 countries here today.

Indeed, that the participants hail from all parts of the planet is a reflection of how the world is such a colourful kaleidoscope of human diversity. We belong to many thousand ethnic groups. We speak in three thousand different tongues. We recognise and worship God in different ways. We are proud of our own distinctive cultures.

We should be thankful for this incredible variety, and indeed rejoice in it. People of different religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds should be able to prosper together not only on one planet, but in one society. Considering that we are all God's creations, we should be able to work out ways by which we are able to live with one another in harmony and mutual regard, just as we would with people of our own kind.

Unfortunately this is too often not the case. We are more inclined to search for differences rather than recognise commonalities. We tend to reject diversity rather than embrace it. This is true even in relatively homogenous societies. But societies that are multireligious, multiethnic and multicultural are particularly vulnerable.

It is not surprising therefore if history is very much a story of how societies and governments seek to address and manage this profound diversity. Today we are witnessing new and more complex challenges to the management of diverse societies; challenges that have arisen due to globalisation, the revolution in information and communication technology, and the spread of democracy. These challenges, I must emphasise, have often resulted in the greater good.

Keynote Address by Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia at the Asia Media Summit at Hotel Nikko, Kuala Lumpur on 19 April 2004.

There is greater awareness of the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, and their protection and promotion in diverse and plural societies.

The genocide and brutal disempowerment of many indigenous peoples and the seizure of their territories that was carried out by more powerful immigrant communities with impunity just a few hundred years ago are less possible today. No longer can such actions be concealed from the outside world. The global media will quickly expose the crime, and the collective conscience of the world, acting through international bodies and responsible nations, will be a powerful deterrent. There is greater appreciation of the rights of all communities irrespective of race, religion and language, and pressures to conform to global human rights standards are persistent and powerful.

Yet globalisation, the information and communications technology revolution and the appeal of democracy have also made the governance of multicultural societies more difficult in some instances. The emphasis on rights with scant mention of responsibilities and obligations has made the preservation of social order more difficult, especially in societies that are still underdeveloped politically and institutionally.

There is a great temptation to insist on a one-size-fits-all model for all countries. Unfortunately, this approach demonstrates little regard for the history and unique characteristics of different socio-political climates. It ignores the need to adapt systems to local peculiarities and characteristics, and therefore creates more problems than it solves. The cure to an illness cannot be so severe that it leaves the patient critically ill or even dead. One gets the impression that it does not matter if nations are destabilised, if peace gives way to violence and if economies crumble, so long as a particular brand of democracy is pursued. When this happens to countries with plural societies, the result is often the dismemberment of the state, or sustained turmoil. The ultimate victims are unfortunately the citizens, the very people whose welfare we want to improve. As we are seeing in Iraq and Afghanistan, nation building is more difficult in reality than it looks on paper.

Managing societies with many cultures, ethnic groups and religions is an extremely complex task, especially if the foundations of these societies are not yet secure. I must confess that I am no expert on these matters. I do not know enough about how others are responding to the challenges posed by their societies. But I believe I do know a little about how it is done in my country, given that I have had the privilege of participating in its development for the better part of four decades. Today, the buck stops at my table. Ultimately, I am responsible for how we address the challenges of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity in my country.

Malaysia is truly a melting pot. While one ethnic group, its language and culture form the majority, other ethnic groups with their respective languages

and cultures are also strongly represented. In fact, there are about 60 ethnic groups, large and small, in Malaysia. Malays make up 54% of the population. The Chinese constitute a solid quarter of the country's population, while 8% are Indians. Other indigenous groups comprise another 12%.

We are home to many major religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. Malaysia is also a potpourri and confluence of the major Asian cultures – Malay, Chinese and Indian. Some see in Malaysia a microcosm of Asia, 'truly Asia' as we like to say, although we are also open to other cultural influences, not least from the Middle East and the West.

Overseeing such a potentially volatile mix is a major challenge, compounded by the fact that we are a young nation, not yet even five decades old. Our territorial configuration and political constitution are relatively recent. We began with a large immigrant population whose attachments understandably lay elsewhere. Their political status at independence was one of the key issues with profound consequences that had to be resolved.

At the time, there was little to bind the peoples of Malaysia together. We had no common history and did not share a vision of a common future. We lived apart from one another, the Bumiputera groups in the traditional villages, the Chinese in the towns and tin mines and the Indians in the rubber estates. Economic disparities emphasised ethnic and cultural cleavages.

Politically, we had no experience of working together as one independent entity. Our democratic institutions were brand new. A Malaysian political culture had yet to evolve. A communist insurgency was still in full swing, appealing in particular to one community and causing tension with other communities.

Against this backdrop, few gave us a chance to survive, much less thrive. We were an ethnic time bomb, waiting to explode. That was hardly 50 years ago. Since then there has been a sea of change. By the grace of God, we have managed to take Malaysia forward, despite our many and monumental multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious contradictions.

Our ethnic communities have not lost their respective identities, yet think of themselves as one – they think themselves as Malaysians. No one questions loyalties any more. Our shared history as one people and one nation confronting common problems has helped us to bond. It has enabled us to share a common vision for the future.

We have just concluded our 11th general elections, proving that we have matured into a politically stable, peaceful, working democracy in which all races and religious groups participate.

There is no magic potion to overcome the challenges of managing a diverse society, especially when nations are young and institutions still in the early

stages of development. All solutions are probably a mixture of careful planning and good fortune. While I believe Malaysia can point to some measure of success in its efforts, I would never presume to prescribe our formula to anyone else. What has worked for us may fail miserably when taken out of the Malaysian context. Each nation must choose the path that suits it best. Nonetheless, permit me to outline some of the core measures that we have taken to keep our growth and development on track.

Our first and most fundamental task was to build a consensus among all the communities on the character of the nation we wanted to live in, and our respective rights and obligations within it. This was our social contract, solemnised in no less than a legally binding constitution. A contract built on the spirit of give and take. There was a conscious commitment to share power among all the groups, and between the federal centre and the constituent states. Our approach was inclusive, empowering all ethnic and religious groups by giving them a share in decision-making, a say in collectively charting the future of the country. All were stakeholders in the Malaysian dream.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the contract was the agreement by the indigenous peoples to grant citizenship to the immigrant Chinese and Indian communities. This changed the character of the nation, from one that originally belonged to the indigenous peoples to one that Chinese and Indian citizens could also call their own. Chinese and Indians now share political power with the Malays, and sit in the federal cabinet and state executive councils.

In return for being granted these political rights, the immigrant communities agreed to special economic privileges for the indigenous peoples given their disadvantaged position. This constitutes the political, economic, legal and moral foundation for the distributive justice policies of the country. These are policies that have sometimes been unfairly criticised as discriminatory by those who are ignorant of the agreement entered into by all parties and the circumstances surrounding it.

The major communities were also granted the right to education in their mother tongues, but the Malay language was accorded the status of official and national language. Though Malay is the medium of instruction in national schools, Chinese and Indians are allowed to have primary education through the medium of their respective mother tongues. Few countries in the world accord this measure of freedom.

Similarly, there is freedom of worship, and all communities are free to practise their respective religious beliefs. However, Islam is accorded the status of the religion of the federation.

As for coping with the politics of a multiethnic society, our plan has been to allow the people to determine what is best for them at the ballot box. We have



not outlawed ethnic politics. Instead, we allow it responsible expression. As a consequence of this, our political parties have generally turned out to be ethnic and region based, although over half of them, 14 to be precise, have joined in a multiethnic coalition that competes in elections as one political party, the Barisan Nasional. Ethnic and region-based interests are therefore moderated within the coalition, a formula which thus far has achieved consistent success.

I believe that any society, and especially diverse multicultural societies, will benefit immensely from a social contract. It provides a framework for political, social and economic intercourse that is agreed upon by all communities. It reduces misunderstandings and conflict of interests, and allows people to focus upon improving their lives in peace and harmony. The failure to put in place viable social contracts is at the root of many conflicts afflicting nation-states around the world.

Malaysia's experience is that a strategy of inclusion, participation, respect for the legitimate rights of all ethnic, religious and cultural groups, and just recognition of the special position due to the indigenous peoples, is the best formula to manage its diversity. We are probably fortunate because our people's values, attitudes and character probably had a lot to do with their ability to arrive at a consensus. As in other societies, we too have the lunatic fringe. But the people are generally moderate, respectful and accepting of each other. They are law-abiding and they value peace. They are also pragmatic and prepared to cooperate for the sake of the larger interest. Even the people at the far ends of the ideological spectrum willingly submit to the democratic political process, which is ultimately reassuring for the country's future.

Our social contract would fail if it were not underpinned by a growing economy. Income disparities between the various communities were unhealthy for communal harmony. The failure to address this issue was the primary reason for the racial riots of May 13, 1969, an event that almost tore the nation apart. Henceforth, policies to eradicate poverty irrespective of race as well as narrow the gap between the Bumiputeras, who are the indigenous people and the other communities, became a defining feature of Malaysia's development strategy. These policies were to be carried out within the context of an expanding economic cake, so that assistance for the weaker community would not be at the expense of the communities that were better off.

The distributive policies adopted by the government do have their drawbacks. Unfettered and indiscriminate assistance will create a class of people who will forever be reliant on subsidies. By and large however, our policies have proved successful and helped reduce tensions between the communities.

As has been the lesson elsewhere, we have found that economic growth and, more importantly, the equitable sharing of the fruits of such growth have a positive impact on the stability of multicultural societies. It provides an

environment conducive to social harmony. Three decades of economic expansion has been especially critical to our nation building efforts. We have been able to avoid the kind of difficult economic conditions that breed hostility and confrontation between groups.

A third key instrument in our efforts to create a cohesive and flourishing multicultural society is education. We have defined for ourselves several fundamental goals. One is to foster a common national consciousness as Malaysians that transcends ethnic, religious and parochial identities without in any way undermining them. Another is to inculcate values, attitudes and behaviour that support a healthy multicultural society. These include mutual understanding, mutual respect, regard for the fundamental rights of all, moderation, and peaceful and democratic approaches towards resolving differences. A third goal of the education process is to promote interethnic and inter-religious harmony through socialisation.

We have not been fully successful in the pursuit of all these goals, and particularly with regard to the last. Parallel streams of education, each effectively serving only one community, have led to segregation of sorts. However, we continue to seek creative and politically feasible ways of promoting interaction and integration. The seeds of national unity must be sown among the young. They, above all others, must be taught and convinced of the benefits of peaceful co-existence.

Let me flag one more important dimension of our strategy to respond to the challenges of our multicultural society. This is the restrained and responsible use of security measures to ensure healthy relations among the various communities. Every society requires the use of security measures to ensure orderly functioning. Multicultural societies that are vulnerable to ethnic and religious stresses are in special need of them.

There are societies that take a relatively relaxed and rather permissive approach towards conflict management and prevention. They can tolerate the odd racial riot without considering it necessary to take effective preventive measures. A few hundred deaths are taken in stride, without undue cause for alarm or the introduction of long-term measures to avoid similar occurrences. Malaysia is not one of these. We were born in the crucible of conflict, in the midst of armed insurgency that almost brought us to our knees. We have been too vulnerable to ethnic conflict, large as well as small, in the past. The racial riots of May 13, 1969 were especially traumatic. We therefore have zero tolerance for ethnic and religious extremism that threatens the peace and the welfare of our citizens. We consider ethnic and religious excesses particularly dangerous, for they have a tendency to evoke powerful passions that are difficult to rein in once they take hold. The political, economic and social damage they cause can be prohibitive, and linger long after the event.

We therefore have in place tough laws, and some of them are preventive in nature. Whilst we would prefer not to have them, we do not apologise for them. They have been legislated through due democratic and legal process. Contrary to what some critics believe, our laws and the restraints they impose on fundamental freedoms are entirely consistent with recognised universal human rights standards. The rights we derogate from are fully permissible under the international bill of rights. Restraints on rights are applied sparingly and responsibly, and they are only exercised when there are credible instances of threats to public order, public morality and national security. We are driven by a strong political will to preserve national unity. Everything that we have and that we are planning for the future is predicated on the assumption that we will be able to keep our country together.

I have no illusions about the future. I do not pretend that we have all the answers. Our way is far from perfect and needs to be constantly revisited, revised and improved. We must especially guard against complacency and constantly tend to our fault-lines. Nations older than us and societies seemingly more cohesive and secure have suddenly discovered that they are in fact vulnerable. Some multiethnic countries that were once stable and touted as the model for others have lapsed into prolonged internecine warfare. Some are prone to frequent outbreaks of communal and sectarian violence. Yet others have simply disintegrated.

The media, in my mind, is well placed to make a positive contribution to the process of bringing people closer together. The media has assumed the role of acting as the world's eyes and ears, allowing people to have almost direct and instant access to events that happen thousands of miles away. Embedded reporting and round the clock coverage etches images indelibly into our consciousness, shaping perceptions and forming opinions. Clearly, the modern media machine has an enormous reach and an unparalleled ability to influence hearts and minds.

I believe that this reach and influence can be used productively, by fairly and comprehensively telling the truth and by educating about the nuances and subtleties that exist in the real world. This reach and influence can build understanding and develop empathy. Conversely, looking at others through one's own tinted lenses, without an appreciation of background or context, will only serve to increase the distance between peoples and accentuate cracks within communities.

In the final analysis however, it is the people that will count. It is they who will determine if their particular multicultural society survives and thrives. Their values, their perceptions, their principles and prejudices, and their dreams and aspirations for themselves as well as their nation, will ultimately govern the kind of world they live in. Either they learn to live together in harmony and stability or perish together in discord and ruin.