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Tun Razak's legacy – his vision

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We need to have young Malay men and women with passion, intelligence and the commitment to lead Malaysia to face the internal and external challenges ahead.

EVER since Nomination Day, an apocryphal story from the 1960s has been stuck in my mind, reminding me of the importance of learning from history.

Basically, the story runs like this: At the time of Separation – Singapore's departure from the federation in 1965 – Tun Abdul Razak Hussein realised that Umno needed more young leaders in the party.

Faced with, amongst other things Lee Kuan Yew's considerable rhetorical skills, Razak wanted young Malay leaders – grounded in their own faith and culture – who would be able to speak and if necessary debate both in Malay and English.

He also wanted young men and women who would be equally at ease mixing across the racial divide and with non-Malaysians.

Razak wasn't obsessed with loyalty. For him the most important question was simple – can the young people do the job?

As a consequence of this initiative, the young Turks (they were young then) – Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Musa Hitam – were drafted into higher echelons of political establishment. The rest, as they say, is history.

It's clear to me that Malaysia was transformed by Razak's enlightened recruitment of talent. Razak's approach to long-term leadership issues was wide-ranging. He wasn't looking for the sons and daughters of his friends. He just wanted people with passion, intelligence and a commitment to Malaysia – young people who were qualified to lead.

Moreover, Razak also acknowledged that such talent had to be subject to scrutiny and be



Great visionary: Razak had the foresight to enrol the brightest young Malays.

accountable to the voters. In this respect he also insisted on drafting the young men into active politics – forcing them to be responsive to the ballot box and popular sentiments.

Whatever Razak's flaws, or rather, those of the bright young things he cultivated, the country was propelled forward. Advancement in terms of infrastructure without socio-political regeneration and change is unsustainable in the long run.

Today, Malaysia is facing countless challenges both internal and external.

On the domestic front, we have a much



younger population for whom the much-touted "social contract" makes little sense. Many question, and rightly so, how and why they should be bound by an unwritten agreement attested to by their grandparent's generation.

This growing unease strikes at the heart of the nation's racial and religious peace. We cannot afford to wait until things explode before acting. Hindraf has shown the damage that can be caused to the social fabric if such issues are allowed to fester without redress.

Internationally, Malaysia is also facing a far more dynamic economic landscape. We are surrounded by newly emerging giants – China, India and even Indonesia.

The size of their internal markets dwarfs our own and yet we appear not to have adjusted to the changing situation as we become increasingly less attractive as a destination for FDI. In the face of this, the nation needs to make some strategic decisions on its economic future.

However, the more complex challenge internationally is geo-political. How will we cope with the rise of our neighbours – culturally and politically?

How will we manage as popular sentiment determines their perceptions of the outside world? Witness how the Japanese have had to

duck and weave with every outburst of anti-Japanese anger in China. In this respect Malaysia faces major challenges that require adept diplomacy. Why?

Well, we are home to three great diasporic communities – Chinese, Indian and Indonesian. Whatever happens our neighbours will end up judging and assessing us by how we manage our own internal political and racial relations and the Internet will ensure they are fully (mis)informed as to what is happening domestically.

Can racially-based policies be sustained as we engage ever more deeply with these giants? Essentially, if we are not careful domestic political tensions will be internationalised.

Given the complexity of the challenges Malaysia is facing, the need for dynamic leadership is self-evident. The regeneration of the political class is essential if the nation is to survive future challenges.

We require a greater balance of young and old, the kampung and the city, the cosmopolitan and the traditional.

Razak understood that power resided in the Malay community and that for this power to be wielded effectively, the elite had to be an elite determined by ability, aptitude and commitment to the nation as a whole. Class, birth and money were irrelevant in his calculations.

Razak had the imagination and foresight to enrol the brightest young Malay men and women in order to ensure that the country remained on an even keel.

His successors in power today would do well to continue this part of his legacy.