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May 13's beautiful silver lining

MAY 13, 1969, the flashpoint from which arose the slew of polemically innovative socio-economic policies to reunify Malaysia's fractured race relations and re-balance the racial equity, was commemorated yesterday with the solemn thinking that never shall the insanity be reprised and the insane people who inflamed it be allowed to run riot again.

In the 42 years since its passing, May 13 also begs the simple inquiry: has race relations improved or worsened since then? Why isn't Malaysia doomed in racial strife? The response will be multi-prong and very complex. There are no simple yes and no answers, an enigma that much can be obviously adduced.

Perhaps some bold think-tank has completed a thorough research tabulating May 13's generational after-effect with the following metrics:

- Would you reside in an area dominated by a race different than yours?
- How many friends of other races (and other nationalities) do you have in person and not just on Facebook?
- Did you, your kin or your friends marry interracially and was the reaction of your family and peers affirmative?
- Would you consume food prepared by other races, religious constraints aside?
- In a multiracial organisation, have you minded or would you mind being led by a person of a different race?

Or the metrics could have revolved around number crunching: racial breakdowns of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia scorers, university graduates, executives, scientists, professionals, control of companies and businesses, political pacts, who has more and who has less, if that's a far better evaluation of progress?

Debate also gravitated to whether the major policies promulgated (New Economic Policy, New Development Policy and now the Economic Transformation Programmes) have achieved or not achieved, and will do the trick of patching the elongated disagreements and differences, and whether economic, business and educational equities have been spread equally or at least equivalently.

The jury, everyone agrees, is still out on that, the raucous debate and bickering that persisted for four decades as the barometer of this tenuous correction, the share of the NEP/NDP/ETP cake being the most frowned upon and fought over steadfastly.

The think-tank's conclusion on race relations is likely to be somewhat neutral: no one race is happy, everyone's complaining of at least one, two or many prejudices and deprivations, at least by the shouting and the missives reported by all media, left, centre or right wing.

There lies the inexplicably positive rub: if no one race is happy, then no one race has the upper hand over the other even though one race has the dominance/control of a big specialised turf (Malays in government and law enforcement, Chinese in all levels of business and wealth creation, and Indians in organised labour, trading and restaurants most multiracially patronised).

If no one is happy, then the dispensation of equality or equivalency, either by the government or the private sector, has been, in the greater scheme of things, fair and balanced although some enterprising NGO will discover in hopeless detail the inevitable pockets of



ethnic groups slipping through the cracks, unable to progress because of some extraordinarily unforeseen metric.

However, if one race professes to be happy with their lot, it can only mean a mired consequence: the re-balancing has gone horribly wrong, politicians of all sides are re-arming their vitriol and trouble looms.

Then it's a good thing that NO ONE is happy.

May 13 may have splintered race relations in that balmy epoch of socio-political upheaval but conversely, it has also brought many races closer together in the spirit of humanity and inherent compassion and kindness, not racial misunderstanding and wearisome social constraints.

There are as many stories of post-May 13 break-ups as there are of forging of special new relationships. Some of the most celebrated stories involve how a Chinese family protected a Malay family in a dominant Chinese area at the height of the tensions and in similar fashion, how a Malay family took a Chinese family under their protection in a Malay dominated area. An Indian family might also be involved in these elemental permutations.

Unfortunately, these stories, profound as they are, seemed to be shy in making the headlines, somehow remaining untouched, unblemished and untold, buried under piles of shrieking talking heads and loggerheads.

And through the descendents of interracial conversations and relations, these inter-ethnic collaborations have actually prospered but throttling under the radar if one cares to dip below the distracting mainstream noise.

Racial relations getting more polarised? Perhaps in some secluded quarters or in the deluded minds of opportunistic politicians but explain how all races enjoy sitting together in big open house feasts throughout the year, shouting hoarsely together for the national teams and form many private initiatives, whether political or social, absent of the loathing of having been thrown together in an explosive mix.

This is May 13's beautiful silver lining, the fervently determined coming together of people of all races despite the hubris that would have destroyed the fundamental inter-community fabric in other nations lacking the innate sense of oneness of Malaysians, because of the chemistry they naturally possess.

Foreigners automatically see and marvel at this silver lining all the time and every time they get the chance to soak in the sights and sounds, and the inhabitants' effervescent plurality as a spontaneous attraction.

Malaysians too can see this exceptional dynamic everywhere they go in every nook and corner of this country, if they care to loosen their political paranoia, biasness and foibles.

Truth be told, it is in Malaysians' DNA to embrace and acclaim each other despite the tiresome political squabbles that fester to plunder the cerebral hemisphere on the right side of the corpus callosum.

No one race can take that away and no one race would want to anyway.