

Let's manifest a better future for M'sia

'M for Malaysia' documentary unites viewers in awakening their memories of GE14 and stimulating thoughts about the future of the country's democracy.

FOLLOWING my last article referencing the Indonesian origins of the haze and the colonial legacy of modern borders, one reader further pointed out that, in light of Malaysia Day, Indonesia has once again managed to unite Malaysians in their reaction to outside incursions: except this time it is pollutants rather than soldiers.

It is an early lesson of political theory that positioning "us" against an "other" is often the most effective way to strengthen group identity, create solidarity and mobilise action.

However, the precise line where the benefits of creating a group identity is outweighed by the risks of conflict with others outside that identity is notoriously difficult to draw.

And, as history has shown time and again, leaders will often deliberately manufacture, exaggerate or capitalise on the perception of an outside threat to bolster their own power, even if it risks war with others.

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ers who seek to strengthen a shared national identity without resorting to antagonism within ourselves or against others.

While acknowledging many differences among citizens, new bonds of shared experiences and common goals can be formed, nurtured and strengthened.

A universal enthusiasm about our food and a passion for celebrating our diverse festivals are ever-green examples of this, and as I mentioned in another recent arti-

cle, there is a time-honoured tradition of short films celebrating unity every year for Merdeka and Malaysia Day.

Together with our Federal Constitution and Rukunegara, these provide substance to national symbols such as *Negaraku* and the Jalur Gemilang.

As I previously observed, there has been a renaissance in longer films as well. Reruns of P. Ramlee and Yasmin Ahmad classics are hugely popular, while newer action flicks are rivalling Hollywood blockbusters in every aspect.

Documentaries, too, are becoming more numerous and more gripping in their presentation, and since 2009 I have enjoyed contributing to *Revealed: Malaysia's Royal Rites - Negeri Sembilan* and *Malaysia's Majesty - Twice a King* and similarly advising the *Road to Nationhood* episodes on *Journey to Independence* and *Formation of Malaysia*.

Now, a feature-length Malaysian-made documentary has been released for the big screen, and I would urge all readers to go and watch it, regardless of the nature of your political views, knowledge or interests.

This is because, even if you were to imagine the whole thing as fiction (and maybe your political leanings would endow you with such a

level of scepticism), *M for Malaysia* would still be a compelling watch.

The storytelling is immersive, and the themes of idealism and regret, revenge and redemption, as well as glee and pathos feature abundantly throughout the combination of interviews interspersed with recent and historical footage that is accessible to the Netflix generation.

Through suspenseful harmonies (especially the I-bVI chord progression) and percussive string passages, Rendra Zawawi's soundtrack evokes heroism and drama - with an appropriate dose of Malay instruments and the immensely powerful quote from our national anthem.

Undoubtedly, any retelling of the events leading up to Malaysia's 14th general election on May 9, 2018, (and the appointment of the Prime Minister the day after) will be propelled by the perspectives of the producers and directors.

In this case, the executive producer is Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, who invited me to watch it with her, while the directors are her daughter Ineza Roussille and Dian Lee.

While Marina was a famous critic of her father's government in public in the past, Ineza identifies *Ops Lalang* in 1987 as a particularly distasteful event of her grandfather's

first administration.

Perhaps she could have mentioned the constitutional crises of 1983, 1988 and 1993, allegations of crony capitalism, perceived financial scandals or other examples of authoritarianism, but *Ops Lalang* is an appropriate choice - not merely as an example of abuse of executive power and political persecution, but also because of the people involved, in setting up the story arc of reconciliation, culminating with last year's general election.

This film is not going to unite voters across political lines.

Indeed, some viewers will feel vindicated in their choice or feel equally strongly that they made a mistake, or leave thoroughly dejected that their hopes have been betrayed.

In this regard, I hope government ministers watch and absorb this perspective.

However, in adding to the valuable corpus of local films that are capable of triggering introspection and contemplation, the documentary will unite viewers in awakening their memories of May 9 and stimulating thoughts about the future of Malaysian democracy.

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