

# HOW TO DEPOLARISE MALAYSIA

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Our society must be more open to new perspectives, focus on shared goals



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**W**HETHER we are watching the television, scrolling on Facebook or Twitter, people are fighting and screaming at one another. There is argument in every issue. Every week we tend to have a new public enemy, to the point that last month's public enemy gets forgotten so easily. This is evident everywhere.

In all points of engagement in contemporary Malaysia, we end up leaving feeling disappointed and unenthusiastic about progress. To the point where accepting it has devalued the necessity for conversation.

Whether our general election happens this year or the next, or on schedule, Malaysia is at a real point of danger in that we are no longer capable of having productive, structured disagreements

that are beneficial to both sides and society at large.

Malaysia has become so polarised that we detach from friends who support different parties, we have massive disagreements with family members who end up voting for others. Whilst GE14 demonstrated how democracy is well and alive in Malaysia, socially, we are still well behind.

Whether it is a staged debate, or a conversation around the dinner table, the key to proper persuasion and debate is to find common ground. Whether you're from Pas or DAP, we must appreciate the fact that we have devoted our time and lives to the improvement of the country.

Whilst we may have varying views of how to achieve this progress, the sheer identification of this shared goal is key in depolarising conversations about politics.

Equally as important in this struggle to depolarise Malaysia is our openness to opposite and opposing ideas. Extending from this, is our ability and humanity of being open to being convinced. If you approach any debate locked to your own opinions as right, then all parties will lose out.

Your opponent will become more antagonised, your audience will see you as nonsensical and you personally lose out on an opportunity to learn a new perspective. The primary act of having a shared goal is key in that it lowers our personal egos and opens us up to alternative facts.

When both sides of a discussion agree that they are driving towards the same objective, then the next key step is to separate ideas from the identity of the person discussing them. Whether the person is from Umno or Bersatu, economic and social policies must be debated based

on the strength of those ideas themselves, not based on the individual's position or personal issues.

This is a lesson that must be learned by both sides, especially when you observe our Parliament. For corporate structures, this is key as well. Regardless of the position of the person speaking, it is their ideas that need to be valued and underlined, not their position or corporate grade. This is key to the growth of any organisation and political party.

Socially, it is important that Malaysia begins to practise this sort of ideas-based debate.

We need to normalise the practice of having panellists speak, without being first labelled as liberal or conservative. We need to allow the practice of opinion articles that may perhaps have anonymous authorship, to promote the ideas presented rather than outlining the identity of the writer.

The danger of political and social debate, as we head towards a possible early general election, is that we become so connected with our ideas that we identify those ideas with ourselves, all the

more making it difficult to be open to other methods. Any attack on our ideas is an attack on us.

This is not how it should be. Growth is to be had if we all accept that ideas, no matter how true they may be, can have a small chance of being wrong at certain times. Personal growth, social growth and even the ability to convince our opponent is more possible when we detach ourselves from the ideas we may back today.

The acceptance of being wrong is the key to better policymaking and leadership. Each of us must ask ourselves what opinions we have changed as time passes by. The more opinions we have developed and changed over time, the greater we can measure our personal growth.

To have the same opinions you had when you were 20 if you are 40 means you have wasted 20 years of your life. To have changed your perspective this year as opposed to last year is a sign of quality leadership.

The writer served in the Dewan Negara as a senator from 2016 to 2019