

Learning to live together in harmony

The Malay Rulers can play a significant role to moderate extremism in all forms and build bridges of understanding.

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THE shadows are lengthening on 2020 and a tumultuous decade is about to come to an end. It is time to reflect on the past and hope and plan for a better future.

The last 10 years have been marred by some extremely unfortunate challenges. We have been witness to corruption scandals of epic proportions. Several institutions established to assist the poor and the marginalized are struggling to survive because the elite who were anointed with the power to guard them misused the trust to plunder them.

What is distressing is that the check and balance institutions and mechanisms to prevent and punish crime and abuse of power failed to enforce the law against the rich and the powerful. The ideal of equality before the law is in serious jeopardy.

The citizenry, ordinarily gullible, has become more aware. At the last three polls, voter revolt has been quite discernible and there are clear signs of declining trust in government. Herein lie two related paradoxes.

First, the more discerning the electorate gets, the more some political parties try to promote the politics of race, religion and region in order to create a diversion from the real issues of nation-building. The advent of the electronic age permits cyber troopers, hired by political groups, to disseminate untruths, sow hatred and reduce all issues to race and religion.

A second paradox is that as long

as a general election does not return a party or coalition to a comfortable and stable majority in Parliament, many political parties will continue to exploit racial and religious sentiment to strengthen their tenuous grip on power. A confident and stable government, while less accountable, is more likely to walk a middle path of conciliation than an unstable marriage of convenience.

As a result of indecisive electoral results, party-hopping has become endemic and political ethics has taken a nosedive. Legislators who cross the floor cause the rise and fall of governments and nullify the results of a general election. At present there is no legislation to ban this nefarious political opportunism.

Despite a narration of the above national vulnerabilities, let us nevertheless count our blessings.

We have avoided violent ethnic and regional conflicts that have marred many other divided societies. Every day, in so many ways, there are acts of friendship and transcendence in our schools, clubs, shops, workplaces, neighbourhoods and sports arenas by people of one faith for people of another. It is some politicians who wish to divide and rule, exploit fears, and summon us to join them in the gutters of hatred.

I am reminded of Roxane Gudeman who says that Malaysia is a country with individual harmony but group tension.

Sabah and Sarawak's discontents were boiling over and are being attended to. Syariah and civil court disputes, unilateral conversions of

children to Islam, the Kalimah Allah controversy, Muslim apostasy, the khat issue, and the existence of vernacular schools always heighten tension. The courts are deeply divided but there have been some scintillating judicial decisions lately.

The Constitution, with all its flaws, has survived 63 years and has given us peace, stability, and prosperity. Its spirit was the spirit of shared destiny. It walked the middle path of accommodation, moderation, and compassion. We adopted a federal system which, by its nature, divides, disperses and shares power between regions and accepts unity in diversity. The drafters of our document of destiny gave citizenship, fundamental liberties and electoral rights to everyone irrespective of race or religion. Freedom of religion and vernacular languages are allowed.

Though the Constitution adopted a vigorous programme of social engineering, the restructuring was done in a peaceful manner without forceful expropriation of anyone's property like in Uganda or Kenya at one time.

In 2018 when Barisan Nasional lost the election, there was a peaceful transfer of power. There were no riots or emergency declarations or suspension of the electoral process. We were an exemplar for the whole world.

The Covid-19 battle is being fought with great determination and unity.

Though we have problems galore, we remain a dazzlingly diverse

society as far as our religions, languages, cultures, dances, music, dress and food are concerned.

What steps can we take to strengthen bridges of friendship and dismantle walls of separation? In the planting and nurturing of unity and harmony, we all have a role to play. This is not a job for the government alone.

We should recognise our diversity as an asset. We should acknowledge that our cultures are intermingled and interdependent. For centuries Malay, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, Thai, Kadazan-Dusun, Iban and European cultures have mixed in our soil to constitute our rich cultural mosaic.

Our educational system must be revamped to nurture tolerance, mutual respect and intercultural dialogue. It must bring the learners together, not separate them on grounds of race, religion or language. If young people do not learn together, how will they live together? The ethnic diversity of school teachers and school principals must be restored. This will be in accordance with Article 136 of the Constitution.

We must provide a new statutory, institutional framework for reconciling race and religious conflicts. Conflicts are unavoidable in any vibrant society. A National Harmony Act should be drafted after wide consultation. We need to learn from others. In many societies including Singapore and the UK, the law is being used to socially engineer a more tolerant society. There is no

shame in emulating others and building our garland with flowers from many gardens. We can also look to Sabah and Sarawak's good example of unity amidst diversity.

Their Majesties the Malay Rulers are the sovereigns for all citizens in their states. They are the head of Islam in their territories. They have power as members of the Conference of Rulers under Article 38(2) to deliberate on any matter they think fit. Their Majesties can play a significant role to moderate extremism in all forms and to build bridges of understanding.

We need to impart in our education system knowledge of the Constitution's glittering generalities, especially its provisions on inter-ethnic relations. If we read about the making of the Constitution, we will see that by far and large the forefathers of our Constitution

especially Bapa Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was animated by a remarkable vision and optimism of a shared destiny among the various peoples of the peninsula.

As we prepare for the new decade, let us pray that our nation recaptures the spirit of accommodation and moderation for which it was an exemplar for the rest of Asia and Africa. Learning to live with each other in peace and justice is the true mark of civilization.

Prof Emeritus Shad Faruqi wishes all Christian readers a Merry Christmas and the joys of the season. The views expressed here are the writer's own.