

The roots of Malaysian dignity

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Malay dignity and Malaysian dignity are ultimately one and the same thing.

IN talking about dignity, the first question we seem compelled to ask is: whose dignity?

Today, four universities have co-organised a forum on Malay dignity, which will be attended by our Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Some of the controversy surrounding this forum stems of course from the zero sum culture of Malaysian sociopolitics.

To summarise, in the field of Malaysian politics and economics, we seem obsessed over questions of how we should divide the pie, rather than over questions of how we should grow the pie.

Against this backdrop, the promotion of Malay dignity will be felt by some to be at the expense of the dignity of other Malaysian ethnic groups.

Perhaps this is what prompted DAP veteran Lim Kit Siang to ask: will this forum be followed by fora on the dignity of the Chinese, Indians, Kadazans, Ibans and so on, implying that it would be unfair if this did not come to pass.

The logical end of this reasoning is the somewhat absurd notion of a "dignity arms race" (which is perhaps Lim's point).

Arms races invariably leave almost everyone involved worse off than where they started.

The net result is more capability to do damage across the board, a greater propensity to pick fights in order to justify investing more and more into arms, and ultimately, less security.

The only people to profit from an arms race are, of course, arms dealers – the military industrial complex, where the actual arms race is concerned.

In our analogy, the closest thing we have to arms dealers are

politicians who create a market for themselves by exploiting and playing on the insecurity of people.

This is particularly deplorable in a country whose biggest political parties are essentially race based.

The continued relevance of these parties depends in large part on a sense among the ethnic group they represent that they are under threat. Since it is an ethnic-based party, the most "logical" place for said threat to come from is from other ethnic groups.

Often times, such ethnic parties will go out of their way to engineer that fear, regardless of the degree to which the "threat" from other ethnic groups is real or not.

One peculiar oddity of the Malaysian experience is the manner in which Umno governed Malaysia for over 60 years, all the while claiming that the Malays were under constant threat.

Logically, if Umno was in power for all the time that it was, and was doing its job correctly, shouldn't they have succeeded in their self-proclaimed mission of securing the Malay position?

The fact that the line they sold decade after decade, about being under threat, never changed is an indictment of how building political movements on racial foundations traps one in a self-perpetuating loop.

Malaysia is, of course, not unique in this regard. When I started writing over a decade ago, I remarked on how odd it was that Malaysia organised its political parties along ethnic lines, arguing that it was one of the only countries in the world where this happened explicitly.

I thought that eventually we would fall in line with the rest of the world. It turns out, the rest of



Dignified existence: If we live our lives with integrity, and treat everyone around us fairly and honourably, no amount of poverty or oppression will be able to compromise our dignity. – Reuters

the world has to an extent fallen in line with us.

We now live in a world where identity politics is racing to the forefront of many a national discourse.

Xenophobia against immigrants has helped launch the political career of Donald Trump, paved the way for Brexit, and birthed various right wing nationalist parties in Europe.

So, is a forum on Malay dignity inherently racist?

I think the short answer is probably no; but I think it is definitely not going to be the first step in the direction that Malaysia truly needs to move in.

A vital question to ask is: what is the relationship between Malay dignity and Malaysian dignity?

I believe the key to a better Malaysia is understanding that these two are not only tied together, but one and the same thing.

There is no such thing as a Malaysia in which Malays have dignity, while other Malaysians do not; and there is no such thing as a Malaysia in which Malays do not have dignity, while other Malaysians do.

This may seem to some a bit of a bold claim, but I do believe it can be substantiated if we think about what the roots of dignity truly are.

Firstly, honest work for honest (and sufficient) pay is perhaps the

foremost cornerstone of dignity. If one cannot feed oneself or one's family, then dignity is often highly elusive.

Secondly, dignity involves an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The only way to live with dignity is to always recognise and uphold the dignity of others.

By refraining from oppressing, bullying, or vilifying others, and choosing instead to respect everyone we interact with, we ensure the dignity both of ourselves and everyone we interact with.

Thirdly, and most importantly, dignity is internal.

While the preceding roots of dignity can be influenced considerably by external factors and conditions, the true, unshakeable core of dignity lies ultimately in an untouchable place deep within each and every one of us.

If we live our lives with integrity, and treat everyone around us fairly and honourably, no amount of poverty or oppression will truly be able to compromise our dignity.

If we subscribe to this understanding of the roots of dignity, is there anything about the challenges to dignity that is peculiar to one or another ethnic group in Malaysia?

I daresay there is none.

We are constantly being misled by politicians.

We are misled into believing that

the core problem is the income gap between Malays and non-Malays.

Such a gap exists and needs to be closed, but the real core problem is the growing income gap between rich Malaysians and poor Malaysians.

We are misled into believing that people with a different skin colour or creed from us are constantly out to insult, demean and oppress us.

Such people exist, but do they truly represent the majority? Or do politicians turn themselves into virtual loudspeakers for those people, fanning small flames into entire forest fires?

Our pursuit for dignity must be rooted firstly in the kind of emotional intelligence that can resist getting fooled and riled up by those loudspeakers.

More importantly, it must be rooted in the unshakeable understanding that our dignity is inseparable from the dignity of our brothers and sisters.

When we truly internalise this understanding as a nation, we will – each and every one of us – be able to hold our heads high, together as one.

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