



Contradictory DZOF AZMI

IN this year's National Day speech, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim quoted Datuk Onn Jaafar from 1946: "Bercakap tentang kemerdekaan terlalu sahaja mudah tetapi hendak kemerdekaan itu kekal di tangan kita adalah perkara yang berat dan susah." My translation: 'It's easy to talk about independence, but maintaining it is a challenging and formidable task.'

Anwar used this quote while talking about the meaning of Merdeka - not only independence from a colonial power but also in spirit and thinking. He said that although a country might be free, its spirit can still be shackled. He also pointed out that although the ruling elite may change, arrogance and exploitation remain too familiar for comfort, which I assume was code for something everybody understands but feels it's too inconvenient to say out loud.

The never ending fight for **Merdeka**

If we are still not yet free enough in our thoughts and beliefs to live with people of different creeds and colours, then the truth is there is still a lot to be done to achieve independence.

As a researcher who has worked on several documentaries about Malaysia's independence (the *Road to Nationhood* series available on Astro Go), I decided to delve deeper into this quote to understand its context. A cursory Internet search reveals a reference to a similar phrase in a collection of speeches by Umno presidents. Further searching reveals a PDF scan of that particular speech in full.

The quote I found wasn't exactly the same as Anwar used. The actual wording is: "Apa yang ditimbang hari ini ialah untuk dijalankan hari esoknya, bukanlah boleh dipertarungkan tentang kemerdekaan terlalu sahaja mudah tetapi hendak kemerdekaan itu apabila didapati kekal di tangan kita. Perkara ini berat dan susah." My translation: "What is deliberated today will be implemented tomorrow; it is not to be taken lightly. It's easy to talk

about independence, but we also want to retain that independence once we have it. This is what is difficult and challenging."

Two things struck me when I read this: First, there is a different flavour to the quote used in Anwar's speech; and second, this original quote is clearly talking about more than just the difficulty of holding on to Merdeka.

Indeed, much of Onn Jaafar's speech is about how shortsighted it is to talk about wanting independence if you're not actually ready for it when you get it. He outlines issues ranging from how to form the Cabinet and government and who can interact on a level footing with governments of other nations, to how to fund an army to protect us against enemies within and without.

"Kita sekarang ini hendak melatih anak-anak kita supaya layak cukup dengan tidak payah diganggu oleh siapa-siapa lagi,"

said Onn Jaafar. That is, we need to develop ourselves first before we can run our own country by ourselves.

He didn't express these concerns because factions within Umno were eagerly aiming for independence in 1946. Instead, it was a response to Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya, which had been aggressively campaigning for full independence for years, even using "Merdeka" as their slogan in 1945. Onn Jaafar and Umno, however, opted for a more measured approach, gradually seeking common ground with the British.

But perhaps the most surprising thing for some was that when Onn Jaafar referred to internal enemies, he meant "bukan bangsa Melayu, jika mereka tiada suka kepada kerajaan kita" - non-Malays who didn't support a Malay-based government.

"Tujuan kita hendak menjadi negeri ini sebenar negeri Melayu, segala hak mesti di tangan Melayu. Oleh itu janganlah terpedaya oleh puak yang kononnya membela Melayu tetapi membantu orang menuntut hak Melayu itu." My translation: Our intention

is to make this nation a Malay nation, with everything in the hands of Malays. Because of that, do not be taken in by those who appear to be on the side of the Malays but help those who seek the rights of the Malays.

This is in stark contrast with what has been said during National Day month for as long as I can remember, as well as what Anwar clearly alluded to earlier this week: That Malaysia is a multitude of races working to build a better nation together.

I have previously written about the contradictions of Onn Jaafar, who would on one hand advocate the need for good relationships among the races to make the Malaya project successful, yet on the other hand actively campaign for Malay superiority and rights (especially in his later years after he left Umno and headed Parti Negara).

This contradiction to me encapsulates Malaysia's dilemma. As a nation we are still fractured, still saying one thing in August and early September around Malaysia Day, and something else during election season. We want muhibbah, and yet still use race to distinguish our politics.

Perhaps the lesson we should take from all this isn't that far away from the point of Anwar's speech: That building this nation is a never-ending task and if we are still not yet free and open enough in our thoughts and beliefs, then the truth is, there is still a lot to be done.

Logic is the antithesis of emotion but mathematician-turned-script-writer Dzof Azmi's theory is that people need both to make sense of life's vagaries and contradictions. Write to Dzof at lifestyle@thestar.com.my. The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.