

Not easy to eradicate race-based politics
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MANY have asked me why we cannot do without race-based politics in Malaysia.

The short answer is that we all want to remember and be recognised according to our racial origins, the countries of our ancestors came from, the languages we speak, the cultures we belong to.

We really don't want to say we are just Malaysians and nothing else.

If it is pointed out to us that in many countries where people of different racial origins live, there is no racial politics, no identification of the citizens with the countries of their origin; we will say that we are different. You cannot compare them with us. Yet on most other issues we compare ourselves with them.

But are we so different from them. There are actually a lot of people of foreign origins in Malaysia who seem to have forgotten their origins. These are the people of Indian, Arab, Indonesian and even Turkish and European origins who are accepted as indigenous people by all of us. They have been so accepted because they identified themselves fully with the indigenous people. They speak the language of the indigenous people habitually, practice the customs and traditions of the people they have been assimilated into and incidentally they are Muslim.

According to the Federal Constitution these people are Malays and are therefore indigenous and not foreign in origin. There is a row in Sabah because of the number of people who have been made citizens. Some of those people had been expatriated although many returned illegally.

But most of these people qualify to be citizens. They have been staying in Malaysia (Sabah) for decades. They and their children speak Malay, the national language.

On the basis of length of stay and mastering of the national language, they qualify to be citizens of this country. And so the acquired citizenship.

By comparison we have many citizens who cannot speak the national language who were accepted as citizens. And we are still giving citizenship to foreigners who wish to be Malaysians on condition they have been living in this country for 10 out of the last 12 years, speak the national language and take the oath of allegiance to the country. So why cannot the migrants to Sabah who have all these qualifications be accepted as citizens? The objections for them being accepted seem to be political.

And so the racial factor crops up again. There was a time in the distant past when parties based on ideology contested in elections. They were all rejected in favour of race-based parties.

If we don't want our politics to be race-based, then we must forget our racial origins, speak the national language as our mother tongue and swear allegiance only to this country. We can retain our religion however.

Maybe one day this will happen. But for the present our politics will be race-based despite our protestations that we are not. We must not even say we are multi-racial as this implies consciousness of our racial differences.

The writer is the fourth prime minister of Malaysia. This article appears in his blog chedet.cc

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