

Malaysia yesterday and where to, tomorrow?

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September 16, 2013, marks the 50th year that Sabah and Sarawak, together with the Malaya Federation, established the new Malaysia. It was not an easy feat and looking back, Malaysia was born during a time of upheaval in the region. Southeast Asia post-independence was a mess.

Malaysia spent its adolescent years surviving its worst racial riot and manoeuvring external forces, from distrusting neighbours to Western powers that continuously challenged Malaysia's tripartite formula.

After World War II, European efforts to regain control in most of their colonies failed and many resulted in bloody wars of independence. Burma was among the first to gain independence from the British in 1948 but only after a brutal crackdown on its communist insurgency. This was followed by Indonesia in 1949 as well as Laos and Cambodia.

However, unlike Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam only became independent from France in 1954 after fighting a bitter war which divided the country into two, resulting in a bloody civil war that lasted until 1975.

The Cold War that crept into our region went full blown with the Vietnam War. The humanitarian tragedy that resulted caused thousands of Vietnamese to become refugees, seeking shelter in neighbouring countries including Malaysia. Lang Tengah and Pulau Bidong, two exotic islands now touted as ideal tourist destinations, were used to place thousands of the Vietnam "boat people", a term referring to the Vietnam refugees who fled by boats.

Even Sungai Besi in Kuala Lumpur had a camp to house refugees until the 1990s before they were relocated to a third country. However, Laos and Cambodia had to bear the brunt of US Cold War containment strategy of keeping the communists at bay. A rough estimate suggests that around 600,000 died in Cambodia alone as a result of US carpet bombings.

Things were also not so rosy in Indonesia and Thailand, with the coup d'état of Sukarno and the military rule in Thailand, the Cold War brought so much misery.

The whole region was unstable and no country was spared, including Malaysia. Indonesia accused the formation of Malaysia as a neo-colonialist scheme and announced the "Confrontation" policy against Malaysia in 1963.

At the same time, the Philippines claimed that North Borneo belonged to it and until today it has not officially relinquished its claim. It has been documented that President Marcos had planned to reclaim the territory under a military operation known as operation Merdeka.

The infamous Jabitah massacre, also known as the Corregidor massacre, clearly indicated how serious the Philippines was in reclaiming Sabah. This incident refers to the massacring of Moro Muslims who were recruited by the Philippines Armed Forces. They were killed for trying to escape from covert training meant to prepare them to reclaim Sabah. Their mission was to destabilise and ultimately provide a window for the Philippines to enter Sabah.

It was said that upon realising their objective, many could not go through with the mission and sacrificed themselves instead. But due to the lack of official investigation, little is known of the incident. However this year, the 45th anniversary of the massacre, the Philippines government has acknowledged the incident for the first time.

Malaysia survived, just like her neighbours. With the creation of Asean, Southeast Asia entered a détente with no full-blown conflict occurring since and by 2015 Asean will be stepping into a new era of foreign relations when the Asean Economic Community comes into effect. We are now considered a region of opportunity and prosperity.

However, 50 years after Malaysia's formation we are still struggling with the most fundamental question, our national identity. When the whole of Asean has progressed, albeit economically, not all is equal and discourse on nationhood is seen as the language of the past, that of Sukarno and Ho Chi Minh.

Even Cambodia is moving on, with its current International War Tribunal being held to confront its past atrocities. Yet, Malaysia is still grappling with national identity; until today we cannot even discuss ethnic and religious relations on an equal footing and Sabah and Sarawak continue to be treated unequally.

We have also yet to address the events of May 13; every ethnic group has its own narrative of the riots which defines their view of the other. The reaction by all levels of society towards the film *Tanda Putera* reaffirms this.

How can we define a national identity if we are continuously embattled in ethnic debates and the distrust between Peninsular and East Malaysia is wider than the sea that separates us?

2013 has been a challenging year. With the 13th General Election mired with irregularities, ethnic and religious confrontations escalating, and economic disparity widening, there is a sense of feeling overwhelmed and at a loss as to the direction we are heading.

While there is much anger about the management of this country, and rightfully so, we also have to look into ourselves and ask, what have we done? As long as the debates surrounding our nationhood is myopic and driven by ethnic and regional interest only and references to history are merely made to justify our views and action, then we will get nowhere.

As Amartya Sen had said in his article *Our Past and Our Present*, the central issue is not about invoking the past but how the past is brought into contemporary discussion about the present.

History is there to guide and educate us, so that we know where we come from and how not to make the same mistakes but we cannot continuously invoke the past to justify our incoherent actions of today.

Malaysia has been blessed, not because of our government but because we have continuously been given the chance to get our nationhood right and that window, amazingly is still open. Let us not wait for it to close. Happy Malaysia Day! - September 15, 2013.

Source:

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