

While wishing Malaysia "Happy Birthday"...

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On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr, among others, led a civil rights march on Washington for "jobs and freedom". There, he delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech, saying he was there to "cash a cheque" for "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

He spoke of an America where his children "will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character".

He concluded: "And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last'."

Nineteen days later, our father of independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman, stood before a nation and said: "Now finally, the peoples of Malaysia are celebrating the establishment of Malaysia. This is the time to think earnestly and hopefully on the future of Malaysia as the whole country resounds with joy.

"So I pray that God may bless the nation of Malaysia with eternal peace and happiness for our people.

"The Federation of Malaya now passes into history. Let us always remember that the Malayan Nation was formed after many difficulties during a long period of national Emergency, yet its multi-racial society emerged, endured and survived as a successful and progressive nation, a true democracy and an example to the world of harmony and tolerance.

"As it was with Malaya, so it can be with Malaysia. With trust in Almighty God, unity of purpose and faith in ourselves, we can make Malaysia a land of prosperity and peace.

"In doing so, let every Malaysian in all the States of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah ensure that our Malaysia is truly worthy of the aims and hopes we have shared, the trials and stress, we have endured, in working together to achieve our common destiny.

"MERDEKA! MALAYSIA!"

Both of them were great men. Both shared a dream. While King dreamed of a day "when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands", the Tunku recognised that Malaysia's "multi-racial society emerged, endured and survived as a successful and progressive nation" and he wished for a Malaysia that "is truly worthy of the aims and hopes we have shared".

Fifty years on and now America has a black president. Unfortunately, Malaysia is still grappling with the "ownership" of the word "Allah"; which race should get more or less; which institute of higher learning should be restricted to which race; who should be empowered to determine the religion of a child and the like.

We should not, however, forget that Malaysia is only 50 years old while America is 237 years old. In terms of nation-states, Malaysia is but a small kid in pre-school.

The greatness of any country is not measured by the absence of crisis but, in my opinion, by how the country rises from a crisis to become better, stronger and wiser.

May 13, 1969, for example, left a huge black blot on Malaysia's white historical canvas. But the real question is whether we have learned anything from that sad and very unfortunate episode and whether we have emerged a better nation since then. There is of course the Tanda Putera film which suggests that to some people May 13, 1969 is all about finger-pointing and blame games. However, the strong public opinion against that film and the general reaction of distaste at the film is suggestive of a citizenry which is matured, idealistic and adverse to racial polarisation. That is heart-warming.

Oh yes, we have had our moments of shame. The Memali incident. The rape of the judiciary. The famous black-eye incident. The Al-Ma'unah botched uprising. The sodomy trial. The Operasi Lalang. The cow head shame. The Allah issue. The body snatching incidences. And so on.

But each of them was met with incredulity by the society at large. And each time it happened, there were brave voices of dissent fighting to be heard and were in fact heard. Never mind that the powers that be sometimes brushed aside these voices. That's politics. The bulk of the mature and level-headed citizenry dabbles in politics but is not consumed and drowned by politics. That to me is a good sign. It is a good sign for a young child in pre-school to notice all these; to analyse and to learn from them.

At the end of the day what marks a great country are not the monuments, the highways, the racing tracks or the administrative centres. It is the soul of the country. It is the soul and spirit of its people. It is US, the children of the country.

We determine everything. Regardless of what is thrown at us, we hold the option. Do we want a Malaysia which is "is truly worthy of the aims and hopes we have shared" or a Malaysia with endless hatred, bigotry, bickering and fractiousness?

Do we, as a people want the next 50 years to define us?

Or do we, as a people, wish to define the next 50 years? - September 15, 2013.

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