

Rekindling Tunku's commitment to liberty and justice — Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin
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FEBRUARY 10 — Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj declared in the Proclamation of Independence of the Federation of Malaya, and then the Proclamation of Malaysia, that this nation of ours will “forever be a nation based on the principles of liberty and justice”.

Right from the beginning, liberty and justice were the twin principles that were to inspire our nation — sentiments repeated across his many speeches and writings, as well as those of other leaders of the era such as Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman or Datuk Mohamad Said.

The Rukunegara talks about “guaranteeing a liberal approach towards her rich and varied cultural traditions.” Those who fail to realise these values are the founding philosophy of our country should read the documents instead of distorting and misinterpreting selected words of the Constitution.

Unfortunately, politicians everywhere have lost the ability to lead, and have instead succumbed to winning simply through populism, as the votes for Brexit and Donald Trump have shown. My fear is that we will see a greater lurch towards populism as we get closer to the 14th General Election.

Exploiting ethnic and religious tensions is among the easiest ways to make political gains, notwithstanding helpful electoral boundaries and privileged access to media which will pliantly obscure the elephants in the room.



One intriguing development is the change of tone we see among some veterans. Supposedly retired politicians who in the past damaged the independence of so many national institutions are repenting and trying to fix problems they created.

Former ministers, previously part of the problem, are now talking about the need to stop the rot that they once fostered. Newspaper editors who once aided and abetted

these authoritarians now lament the loss of freedom of the press. Though they might want to make amends, cynicism surrounds their actual motives.

It is worrying the same old people are presented to us as potential solutions, as if we do not have enough younger people who can offer fresh leadership for the country. This is why we hope for positive change to emerge out of the Transformasi Nasional 2050 initiative. It is right to focus on the younger generation, and to take a bottom up approach.

But three aspects ought to be borne in mind. First, youthful enthusiasm must be coupled with experience and wisdom from those who have endured real-life challenges.

Second, we must respond to everyone in the national conversation, rather than hand-picked audiences and pre-planted questions.

Third, it must be presented as a national agenda which cuts across race, religion and most importantly, the political divide.

After decades of a blurring of lines between government and party, it might inspire more confidence if the process was not led by a government ministry, but rather an independent body or commission.

Turning to the economy, though the United States has pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), we should still make the necessary reforms the government had identified throughout the process of negotiation.

Despite its weaknesses (and although unilateral liberalisation is a superior alternative), the TPP was an opportunity to speed up reforms of our economic governance at a time when political will is weak. We should look seriously at other opportunities such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Asean Economic Community. Certainly, we must avoid the temptation to slide back into protectionism.

At the same time, we must ensure the fruits of globalisation are enjoyed by everyone in society. It is because of the perception only some benefit from liberalisation that autocratic populists are able to make arguments that sound convincing.

We must also be wary of geopolitics. There is a difference between foreign investment and foreign intervention. When investors issue statements about domestic politics, or when domestic actors feel the pressure to offend the so-called “investors”, we must take a step back and think whether we are dealing with investment or intervention.

In such a climate, the independence of our institutions is ever more crucial, to check and balance or at least shine a torch on decisions not in the national interest.

There is still an opportunity to go back to the vision we once held dear as Malaysians. To see our country upholding the principles of liberty and justice, despite the growth of authoritarian voices internationally and domestically.

In the words of Tunku Abdul Rahman, “If we pull together and work together with the maximum of goodwill and harmony, there is no limit to what our people can achieve in the years to come.”

** This is an abridged extract of the President’s speech delivered by Tunku Zain Al-’Abidin at the seventh anniversary of Ideas and commemoration of Tunku Abdul Rahman’s birthday.*

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