

**KEYNOTE SPEECH BY TUN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD AT PERDANA DISCOURSE  
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**The Quest for National Unity: A Historical Perspective**

The idea of a nation state began to crystallise in 1500 A.D. Europe was then not yet divided into separate countries. Europe was governed by powerful warlords who ruled peasants living on lands which the former claimed as theirs. These peasants served the warlords as slaves and soldiers to fight for them for even more land. The European communities were also ruled by a number of Roman as well as German emperors. As a result of the different emperors and rulers, the European communities were a mixed group of societies that comprised, among others the Romans, Germans, Latin and Slav. The European countries became recognised as they are today only after the 18<sup>th</sup> century when they were divided into different states by different rulers.

Many countries around the world had evolved much in the same way as Europe. There were no well-defined boundaries. The mixed group of people lived wherever there were lands or came and conquered lands for themselves. The Muslim Empire known as the Land of the Ummah was not divided into different states. The followers of the faith lived as one religious group. The Chinese once ruled up to as far north as Siberia, while princes and maharajahs ruled India until the British colonials came and divided it into states. Malaya was also once ruled by chieftains and sultans until the Dutch, Portuguese and the British came and took over the local government and separated the Malay Peninsular into different states.

**The Essence of National Unity**

The movements and settlements of people lead to the formation of multi-racial countries all over the world. They are made up of people of different origins, colours, cultures and languages. These societies of different communities usually experience problems like identification with the country because of their complex social backgrounds. When different races and cultures merge, there will be three different kinds of integration among the society:

- One culture will dominate and force other cultures to assimilate with it
- A single culture that results from a total integration of many cultures
- Different cultures that maintain their differences and do not assimilate with other cultures

## **National Unity – The Case of Malaysia**

Malaysia has a very distinct mix of different ethnic groups. People from different races live together in harmony and over time have blended and adopted some aspects of other cultures from each other. For example, the hot and spicy Malay and Indian food are also favoured by the Chinese. The Malays are taken to using chopsticks when eating and people from different races enjoy *teh tarik* and *roti canai* at the *mamak* stalls. The differences are further diminished with mixed marriages among the different races. The Malays, Chinese and Indians who have their own ethnic characteristics have somehow blended and adopted the same culture which is uniquely Malaysian.

Political leaders (UMNO, MCA, MIC) have consented and agreed that Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) is spoken for better understanding in doing business among the various races. This is because the Chinese speak different dialects that are not understood even by some Chinese, and the Indians also speak in different tongues, also not understood by all.

Most Malaysians accept the need to sacrifice in order to achieve success for the integration of the nation. The people should adhere to the philosophy introduced by Tun Razak of sharing the economic cake which will continue to grow when shared by the population instead of having the cake shrinking when they have it all to themselves.

### **Factors that Impede Efforts Toward National Unity**

There are extremists and purists who are bent on being “pure” and who do not tolerate any “impurities” in their culture. Many Chinese have lived in this country for generations, who, however, still act as if they are still in their own motherland and not in a new country that is Malaysia. Then, there are the Malay purists who insist that Malay is spoken to the point of denying access to knowledge. There are still many Malays who are not economically strong and who are not competitive. They still work on the old mindset namely the “Ketuanan Melayu” where they feel that Malay Reserve Land is necessary. This old mindset created by the British Colonials works on the concept that if the Malay Reserve Land is allowed to be bought by the Non-Malays, eventually the bumiputras will not have any land at all. This fear will disappear if the Malays prosper and have the capacity to buy lands. Finally, it is important to cultivate the culture of savings among Malays. In order to equalise the competition among the races in

Malaysia, it is important that the Malays adopt some changes to their culture and value system by working hard, cultivating savings habit and acquiring knowledge.

A change of mindset is definitely incumbent upon the Malays. This will allow them to better compete with other races. When the Malays are able to compete, uncertainties and fears like having to hold on to Malay Reserve Land will disappear. In addition, more non-Malays need to join the government services. When all these are achieved, social integration will be faster and better.