



Race relations: From Merdeka to 1Malaysia

by K.K. Tan

WHAT happened to the spirit of Merdeka that Datuk Seri Najib Razak saw fit to revive through his 1Malaysia concept when he took over as prime minister five months ago? How have race relations evolved in our journey to become a successful and developed nation?

Fifty-two years ago, our forefathers achieved independence from our powerful colonial masters because, and only because, all the races worked together and were united for a common cause. There were give and take, compromise, mutual respect and acceptance of each other as citizens of the new nation with a common destiny.

Our country then was relatively undeveloped with a low level of literacy among the vast majority of people. But the people knew what they wanted and they worked hard to get it. The unity and solidarity of our people in 1957 encapsulated what "1Malaysia" is all about.

Roughly two generations have grown up since Merdeka. In the haste to acquire wealth and power, many people have forgotten the meaning of Merdeka and what it stood for at that time. There are even attempts now to re-write history to play up or play down the role of various races.

Does it really matter now, after more than half a century that our forefathers might have played different or uneven roles in securing independence? Are we going to waste our time and energy bickering about who did more or who did less for Merdeka? Surely there are far more pressing issues to address now.

For the generations born after Merdeka, most would want to be treated as equal citizens of the country regardless of what their parents or grandparents did or did not do. 1Malaysia is about building a more inclusive society so that no one would be left behind.

There are also arguments about the "social contract" and what was actually agreed by our forefathers. Perhaps we should let the experts and historians sort out our pre-Merdeka history. In the meantime, let's agree to disagree about the past and let's get on with building our future together as one nation.

For national unity to be sustainable in the new era of knowledge, globalisation and freedom, it must be based on equality, justice and mutual respect. At the same time, there should also be greater access and opportunities to all socially disadvantaged people based on need rather than creed. This would be in line with the spirit of Merdeka and 1Malaysia and certainly not against our Constitution.

The term "tolerance" should not be used to promote racial understanding since we are all members of the human race. Tolerance implies negative



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connotations about our diversity. What is so obnoxious about people of another race or culture that we must tolerate them?

Our country is going through a critical transition now and it's important to understand the challenges to race relations since Merdeka.

The period after Merdeka until the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 had both strengths and weaknesses.

The main weaknesses were a largely unregulated *laissez faire* economy and the lack of attention by government then to address the poverty of the vast majority of the Malays who were mostly living in the rural areas. True, there were also poor Indians, Chinese and Orang Asli but the sheer number of dispossessed Malays who were left behind in the economic development was becoming political dynamite.

Perhaps our first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was uncertain on how to steer the new economy and monitor developments and feedback. Despite his liberal, fair-minded and multi-racial outlook, he had difficulty adapting to the social dynamics at that time. Tunku's greatest achievement was in securing independence from Britain without any bloodshed due to his special ability to unite the people of all races on a common platform.

The racial inequality in economic terms widened to an explosive climate in 1969 resulting in the infamous May 13 racial riots. Tunku was forced by his own party (Umno) to step down as prime minister and the NEP was formulated to address this inequality. But the NEP was meant to eradicate poverty regardless of race and to restructure society in order to do away with the identification of race with economic functions.

The NEP was therefore, more a class- or income-based affirmative programme and

was supported by a majority of the non-Malays who accepted the need to address this issue. The idea here was to help the poorer Malays achieve a level playing field by giving them special assistance in education, employment and doing business.

The new prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and his deputy Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, both men of great integrity, understood clearly then that any policy aimed at helping the poorer section of society would, in practice, help the vast majority of poorer Malays anyway. Unfortunately, these two leaders passed away prematurely and they did not see through the results of their policy.

The biggest controversy about the NEP was its implementation and how it was allegedly used to greatly enrich only some Malays. The recent comment by our current prime minister that a new model is needed to raise bumiputra equity (only RM2.4 billion left in bumiputra hands after some RM54 billion in shares had been allocated) showed there was some fundamental problem with the implementation of the NEP.

Many Malay leaders have also stated that too much assistance to the Malays would also make them less self-reliant and capable in facing the rising global competition and challenges.

The main strengths of the period after Merdeka were faster economic development and better racial harmony amongst the middle class who were taught in the English medium schools. It is ironical that the colonial language, which had become the language of science and commerce, was a uniting factor to those who attended these schools.

Stories of the various races growing up during that time were best captured by our country top cartoonist Datuk Mohamed Nor Khalid,

popularly known as Lat. Lat was able to bring out the humour and beauty of our racial diversity in a positive and non-derogatory manner.

The spirit of Merdeka has also been captured and promoted by another 1Malaysia icon Yasmin Ahmad who tragically passed away last month. Like Lat in his cartoons, Yasmin, the creative genius, was able to convey in her commercials and films the multi-cultural past and the charm in our diversity. Like Lat, she was able to depict the goodness in all our cultures and make us laugh at ourselves in a spirit of brotherhood. Such passionate and outstanding defenders of our multi-racial traits are rare in our country today and her passing is a great loss to the national unity struggle.

The politicisation of the Malay Language from the seventies, the incorrect implementation of the NEP and the playing of the race and religious cards by many politicians and others have all contributed to strained race relations in our country today.

The Malay Language has in fact been accepted as the *lingua franca* by the vast majority of non-Malays. When I once noticed and asked my Chinese secretary why she preferred to talk over the phone in the Malay Language with her own sister, her reply was she often found the language nicer, friendlier and less coarse in getting the message across than in her own Cantonese dialect. Many non-Malays are happy to use this language in their every lives while they continue to use their own mother tongue and English.

The formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 with the addition of Sabah and Sarawak with their multi-ethnic population has added a new dimension to the federal power balance. But the more harmonious ethnic relations in these two states have also set a positive example and model of

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the way forward for peninsular Malaysia.

A most glaring case of racial prejudice today is how many Malaysians, due to social conditioning, tend to view issues and events through their racial lenses. For example, when there is an accident and or a crime being committed, the first question often asked is about the racial background of the people involved.

Another personal example was when I was invited (together with the Palestinian Ambassador to Malaysia) to speak at a forum at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) in Shah Alam on Feb 3 this year about Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians during their invasion of Gaza. I was warmly applauded by the audience of almost exclusively Malay (Muslim) students, staff and academicians. A member of the audience came to ask me at the end of the talk on how a non-Muslim like me could take such a strong position in supporting the Palestinian cause. I told him that all I did was to take a principled stand for justice and equality and to see other people as human beings first.

What is important now is to uphold the spirit of Merdeka to develop this resource-rich, calamity-free and strategically-located country for the benefit of all. The most important objectives now are to deal effectively with our common threats and challenges, increase our economic pie and improve the standard of living for all.

Without national unity, these cannot be achieved. 1Malaysia can show the way to rekindle the spirit of Merdeka to achieve our common goals.

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