



# Fighting a mythical battle

> Tunku 'Abidin Muhriz finds that Malaysians have huge expectations regarding national unity; most wish that more can be done to bring the images of Petronas Merdeka advertisements back into reality.

**S**OME people go gaga or teary-eyed over these Merdeka advertisements, particularly the Petronas ones, but of the latter I'm not sure whether the tears are induced by happiness or sadness. For it can already be said to be the Great Juxtaposition: where the images onscreen are plainly contradicted by the routine and deliberate fanning of racism for political purposes.

So cynical are people that the splashing of red paint on the surau in Seremban barely a week before Merdeka Day was assumed to be an act of religious provocation, when in fact it turned out to be a retaliatory measure by teenagers told off for playing with fireworks. Those who assumed the worst must be feeling rather silly, although relieved.

Still, this year definitely has a greater air of despair. We have moved further away, not closer, to appreciating the incredible multi-ethnic history of our country that I had written about in 2008, and the "one songket" I imagined last year is fast unravelling before our very eyes. Those of us who thought that the historic elections of March 2008 would result in an evolution from race to ideas and policy-based politics are feeling dejected and cognisant of our own naivety. With the benefit of hindsight, of course the beneficiaries of a race-tinged politics of patronage would have done everything to ensure a perpetuation of the *ancien regime*.

And they seem to be winning quite comprehensively. Racial slurs are hurled about on a daily basis and compliant actors within certain institutions do their part to send this country further into the sinkhole of oblivion. Those decent and courageous actors who do speak out are either completely ignored by influential media outlets or savaged by furious racists in the blogosphere who, one would imagine, would enjoy life better in the northern provinces of Afghanistan.

Across my various roles I get the privilege to meet a huge number of people who represent and contribute to our country in many diverse roles. This year, for example, I have participated in conferences with thinkers, shot clay targets with generals, played the piano with educators, sang with choristers, liaised with civil servants senior and junior, conversed with dancers, chatted with models, quizzed politicians, directed chefs and aides-de-camp, driven with police officers, worked with volunteers in charities for the disabled and for music, disagreed with socialists, collaborated with authors and poets, slaved with those in the media industry, dined with judges and CEOs, and buka puasa-ed

with imam, nazir and their congregations in reassuringly quaint places like Kampung Sungai Lui or Kampung Inas within the confines of the historic Luak Tanah Mengandong.

But one thing I always do, as much as protocol will allow, is to ask them what they think about the state of country, and I can tell you that nearly everyone, even the politicians, when appropriately cajoled, will condemn the racists and say that leaders need to do more to bring the images of Petronas Merdeka advertisements back into reality, before they become part of the Great Myth, like Datuk Zainal Alam's "I am a true Malayan citizen" clip (I have become quite a fan but it's proving difficult to locate his CDs).

Only very rarely will someone tell me that it is worrying that "we" are about to "lose power" and that "we" need to ensure "they" do not get any ideas about "taking over" the country. Normally, "we" and "they" are left undefined but seem to coincide with races or political parties or both. "Oh ye ke?" I will say, and pass them the *masak kuning*.

On the other hand there are some individuals – more senior than you might expect – who spill the beans completely the other way. One particularly memorable conversation was with a retired senior general, who, at a regimental dinner, reminisced about the old days when celebratory toasts would be done with beverages other than water (right up until the 1980s, he told me!) and that instead of flaccid speeches, the evenings would end with joget on tabletops. Remarkable fellow.

Another thing I've realised from my chats with this cross-section of Malaysian society is that their expectations on the national leadership are huge. Yet, it would be unfair to blame the whole situation on weak leadership. Decades of patronage and complacency cannot be easily reversed, and the ascendancy of a reformist wing or the victory of an alternative political party cannot alone undo the damage.

The battle of ideas must first be won, and that is why I am so heartened by my often-fleeting conversations: in essence, they agree with us. If only there was a political leader to speak in a way that resonated with them; to make them want to defend what they hold dear: the Malaysia that they know and love – our job would be so much easier.

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