

Malaysia's Journey Toward Becoming a Truly Independent Nation

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Being properly cognizant of our achievements after more than half a century of independence – no matter how small – can be building blocks for bigger and greater successes; and conversely, recognising our major and lingering weaknesses can be useful in eliminating encumbrances that will sap our energy and waste our already limited resources – both human and otherwise – which may unravel the achievements that have been attained with great difficulty.

However, independence is really a multi-levelled challenge. Merely obtaining *political* independence from colonial powers is not enough. Higher level independence starts with the *freedom and independence of the mind* to think and act according to the highest principles of knowledge and worthy traditions of a nation. Our challenges are therefore mostly centred on the higher *intellectual* level.

Political Stability and Economic Success

Considering our long colonial heritage, our truly linguistically, ethnically and religiously plural society of more than 23 million people, the relatively young age of our nation, and the large oceanic distance separating West from East Malaysia – our *continuing political stability and economic successes* remain one of our greatest achievements. In the last 52 years, we have dealt with great success with the Communist insurgency, the confrontation with Indonesia, the secession of Singapore, the racial riots of May 1969, and the political crisis of 1998.

I think, as a whole we have learnt the lessons of May 1969 rather well and have made great attempts to root out the social-economic causes of the problems by instituting new socio-economic and educational policies, as well as legislating new laws. The fact that, since then, there have not been any serious racially or religiously motivated riots or fatal incidences – which have happened relatively quite regularly even in the more economically advanced European nations – gives us good reason to realise that, perhaps we are on the right track. This does not mean that everything is fine under the surface: the apparently widening racial polarisation in the institutions of higher learning and the emerging of venomous, and vitriolic racial and religious

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remarks in the world of cyberspace are signs of unhealthy trends, even though in the latter development, we are not certain how much of these are written by Malaysians.

Some key aspects – such as education – of the recently expired National Economic Policy (NEP), and its current successor, the National Development Plan (NDP), have been criticised by some as not being based on meritocracy, a concept whose meaning is taken for granted. Like many key concepts and terms in modern Malaysian socio-political, legal and economic discourse, meritocracy is derived from the English language without much regard for the possible historical and cultural differences embedded therein.

To further sustain political stability and the credibility of our democracy we need to effectively demonstrate greater respect for our increasingly more educated, informed, and vocal citizens. Hence, we need to allow more freedom for dissenting or alternative opinions on all matters pertaining to public interest through open and transparent dialogues and communication. Fair criticism on all these matters and peaceful gathering to express their concerns must be allowed. The unwritten pre-Independence Social Contract between leaders of various races and ethnic groups, the Constitution and the laws, as well as ethical and moral reasoning and consensus should always remain our guide and parameters.

Moderate Religion-Centric Development Programme

In Malaysia, the constitutional declaration that Islam is the religion of the Federation and that other religions are free to practise is not merely a reflection of the original genius of the nation's modern founders, but, of equal importance, of their recognition of the historic role of Islam and its respect for the adherents of other religions and ways of life.

Some people have argued that Malaysia is a secular state and not an Islamic state. They argued that the Constitution is a secular one and the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had supposedly indicated that the provision of Islam as the religion of the Federation is to be interpreted in a secular and ceremonial manner. Again, the confusion arises mostly from the meaning of the English terms 'secular' and 'secularism' and their manifestations in Western history and culture. Our own scholar who is also one of the most powerful thinkers in the contemporary world – Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas – in his seminal work *Islam and Secularism* (1978) has already clearly explained these matters. An Islamic state is not a theocratic state and does have valid secular functions.

Merely implementing religious-minded policies does not guarantee national stability and prosperity if religion is interpreted and applied in a narrow and unbalanced manner, which would lead to injustice. In Malaysia, religion has become a general guide for its modernisation process, an achievement that can be

considered quite unique. The presence of many of the world's great religions and ethical philosophies in this country should be regarded as a blessing. Recognising the fundamental differences that exist between each of them – especially in theological and ritualistic matters – does not mean discarding and not benefiting from the many common ethical teachings.

Freedom of religion should not be interpreted merely in a limited personal sense, but also in a social sense, because religions – especially Islam – do have social, legal and institutional dimensions. Personal freedom of religious belief and practice must be allowed within the valid social, legal and institutional frameworks of that religion of which a person is a member. Otherwise, it may lead to a religious and moral anarchy. Freedom of religion also means that the teachings and practice of a particular religion and its related institutions should not be interpreted from principles and methods that are diametrically opposed to its own well-established epistemological traditions. A wise, moderate and just balance must always be maintained. Religion and ethics-based national development, just like its secular opposite, should never be allowed to exhibit any extremist tendencies.

Strengthening of Key Institutions Through Proper Leadership Selection and Succession

Integrity of key institutions, or the lack thereof, reflects a great deal on the spiritual and ethical level of the national elites – and the people who elect them – of a particular country. Malaysia has not done too badly on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index – even if we accept the criteria and definitions used by the various bodies, which are not truly reflective of the comprehensive meanings of development and corruption understood from a religious perspective, Muslim or otherwise.

While the scope and volumes of actions that betray the erosion of integrity have increased, as a whole, Malaysians have done quite well. This statement of mine will surely elicit cynical remarks from some quarters and a quick dismissal from some others, in the light of the regular allegations – as well as officially documented cases – of major corruption and abuse of power by certain individual leaders and others in white collar positions in the various sectors of the country.

Obviously, the perception of some educated groups, as indicated by the keen and critical postings in the various popular blogs, is that the current state of democracy and government is indeed not a positive one. This negative perception among popular internet blogs may not be enough to cause major damage to the overall stability of the country, but it can possibly erode a very important sentiment leading to paralysing cynicism and apathy among the middle class professionals and some members of the private sector, which will derail on-going and future efforts of the

Government. This is because the middle class is the most instrumental group in explaining and implementing the national agenda.

Success and failure of a country, including Malaysia, depend on those of its key institutions such as the executive, judiciary, administrative, educational and religious etc. which in turn rely on the individuals who are selected or appointed to lead them and their constituent departments, branches and units. There is a greater need to ensure that persons with the necessary intellectual abilities, administrative acumen and ethical integrity be appointed. Of course, they must firmly agree with the general outlook of this democratically elected government.

While finding such leaders is hard enough, developing and grooming the next level of capable successors is even more daunting, which explains why a majority of key institutions in many developing nations cannot be sustained or advanced, despite having been led by able leaders in the beginning. Although we have done relatively well compared to most of the other developing nations, we must do better in order to advance to the next and higher level.

It is quite sad that sometimes many policies and projects of a retiring leader are seldom sustained, and further developed by his successor, even if the latter is from the same political affiliation or is from within a similar organisation. There seems to be an ingrained psychological complex that in order to underline one's contributions an almost total cleansing of all the predecessor's policies and projects would be required, even if they have been proven successful. A lot of resources are wasted and negative feelings are generated.

Furthermore, major new policies and projects will not garner full commitment from the members of the institution, because everyone therein knows that these will be likewise dismantled or sidelined by the next successor. Lip service, no doubt, is always loud and impressive but substantially wanting. Often minor players are raised high and acknowledged while the truly worthy ones are ignored. Under such debilitating circumstances, meaningful legacy and traditions that transcend political exigencies can never be established.

Moreover, leadership succession must be relatively orderly and predictable to ensure continuous stability and movement from strength to strength, even if, through fair democratic process, new leaders may emerge and a new government may be formed. The strengths and accumulated experiences of former leaders are seldom solicited, and when offered they are regarded as dangerous criticisms. Hence, similar, though not the same mistakes are repeated and the vicious cycle continues.

Conclusion

For the next 50 years of our journey, a lot more needs to be done – and done well. We must collectively learn from past mistakes and wastages, and develop a systematic

means to reduce and eliminate them. Small nations like Malaysia cannot afford to make many major mistakes and wastages without leading to catastrophic effects. The nature of reality is constant change, but the underlying identity and meaning of a nation should remain the same. It would be a great gift to our future generations and to those of other nations, if we bequeath them guiding ideas, vibrant institutions as well as strong financial structures that they should further improve and refine to deal with the vicissitudes of their own times.