

## **Tending To The Ties That Bind**

By Mohamed Jawhar Hassan

The recent UMNO General Assembly has sparked some concern about the state of national unity in Malaysia. The occasionally insensitive remarks of some of the delegates that were televised into the homes of millions of Malaysians certainly merit this concern, although not only non-Malays but many Malays as well were reassured when the party's President, who is also the Prime Minister, made it absolutely clear that UMNO will remain a moderate party that serves all Malaysians besides its core Malay constituency.

Focusing on the UMNO General Assembly alone however, is more like looking at the symptoms rather than the actual problems, though in this case the symptoms also further aggravated the problems. As is often the case, cause and effect become blurred, and each becomes the other.

Anyone observing the national unity scene in Malaysia would have noted the signs of decline for quite some time now. Views differ over when the slide began in earnest. I, like quite a few others, would put it in the Seventies, when issues of race and identity became sharpened after a spell when they moderated following the launch of the *Rukunegara*. The worst spike in national disunity of course occurred earlier, in the period preceding the May 13<sup>th</sup> Incident.

I think that the national unity scene today is certainly not as bad as it was in 1969. Malaysians gave their biggest ever vote to a moderate multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-regional coalition party in the 2003 elections.

We take many other national unity strengths for granted as well. Despite all the extremist and intolerant voices, the "open house" culture during religious festivals remains as strong as ever. It is one of the more endearing features of multi-

religious friendship that is more than mere “tolerance” in Malaysia. Few other nations can take pride in such a practice.

Despite all the stresses and strains, and the stray voices that call for a review, our social contract still holds, and holds strongly. Indeed the contract we entered into in the Federal Constitution has been reaffirmed in the *Rukunegara* and Vision 2020.

This social contract should not be taken lightly. It is Malaysia’s greatest accomplishment. Few other nations, even those with demographics, politics and cultures that are much less complex and that pose less challenges to national unity, have achieved this kind of strong accommodation. A weak social contract is one of the reasons why there are insurgencies in some neighbouring countries.

The social contract is a tribute to the positive national unity values and good sense of all Malaysians irrespective of race, religion and state. Above all, it is a tribute to the Malays and other indigenous communities to whom the land belonged before it was colonised. They agreed to share their sovereignty with the people of other races who were recent immigrants who became citizens. The indigenous communities were profoundly accommodating, and their preparedness to accommodate made the social contract possible.

We have other strengths too. Malaysians of all racial, religious and state origin are represented in the Cabinet and in Parliament. This is by deliberate and painstaking design. It is not an accident. We all share in the political process, and it is working well.

Minority communities are not required to change their names. This is not so in some neighbouring countries, but it is taken for granted in Malaysia. Our names are our prized attribute. Indeed, they are our identity, and we keep it.

We have national schools teaching in the national language, but we also have schools that teach in the Chinese and Tamil languages. Such a practice would be rare indeed in other countries.

Despite these and other strengths however, it is blindingly clear that we have regressed in many areas. Once, there was an ease with which we mingled with one another. We studied and played together. We thought nothing of spending time in each other's homes. There was hardly a thought for our differences.

No longer. We are more conscious of our ethnic and religious identities now. Our children no longer mingle and study and play as much together. Many of us usually engage and move only among our own racial and religious kind. Indeed, mixing is sometimes frowned upon and discouraged.

We have become more inflexible over issues. We are acutely aware of our own sensitivities and are quick to excuse our excesses, if at all we see them as such. But we are less capable of appreciating the sensitivities of the other communities, or accord them the same considerations.

The space for moderates has shrunk as the extremes become stronger. Where once the moderate position was extolled, today it is often assailed and discredited.

We can point to many factors to explain the slide. Among them would be some elements of our education system; excesses in policy implementation; the limited progress in restructuring society and eradicating the identification of race with occupation; and the gap in incomes that still prevails between the communities.

We can also point to the negative values and attitudes towards each other that are inculcated and spread by some parents, teachers, politicians, community leaders and secular as well as religious organisations. The more open

environment for public discourse that is now available also occasionally leads to tension over controversial issues.

It is not easy to address and resolve all these problems to the mutual satisfaction of all. We tend to blame and put the responsibility entirely on government, or on one group or other. This is correct to an extent. In fact however, we – as parents, relatives, teachers, students, employers, workers and ordinary citizens and voters – are all culpable. We share responsibility, and we can all help to make a difference.

Our education system is one of the most important instruments we must address. No other instrument has as much capacity to foster national unity, or undermine it. No other instrument, perhaps, needs as much urgent attention. Yet the education issue is one of the most sensitive for Malaysians. Any attempt to introduce positive change is met with suspicion and opposition by one quarter or other. We are then condemned to inaction, and the problem continues to fester.

If we want to improve matters however, we cannot avoid the issue. We must confront the problem. We must explore bold, yet pragmatic ideas to strengthen the education system as an instrument for unity. The ideas may require concessions on all sides, but they should not affect the legitimate rights and sensitivities of any community.

One such idea would be to have only one national system of education, with all national-type Chinese and Tamil schools and religious schools dissolved and absorbed into the national schools stream, but with the following critical changes:

1. Better quality teaching of Chinese, Tamil and other major Malaysian languages in the national schools.
2. Those who desire further education in the Chinese and Tamil languages be supported to acquire such education in substantive elective afternoon sessions.

3. A similar arrangement be made for Islamic studies – better quality teaching in national schools, with the option of continuing further learning in substantive afternoon sessions.
4. Absorption of qualified existing teachers in Chinese and Tamil national-type schools into national schools to carry out the above changes efficiently and successfully. The addition of these teachers will at the same time vest national schools with a more multi-ethnic image.
5. Similar absorption of qualified Islamic studies teachers from religious schools into national schools.

Such a move is totally compatible with the social contract we all entered into. It respects and safeguards the rights and choices of all groups. It should be thoroughly discussed, explained and promoted among all interested groups.

Society in general, and especially parents, must be persuaded to support the initiative. Political parties and community leaders should champion and promote it move among their respective constituencies, instead of opposing them for narrow political and chauvinistic ends.

This period of introspection and the coming 50th anniversary of *Merdeka* should be seized upon by all Malaysians to take bold measures to build a better future together for themselves and for the generations that follow.

Indeed, Malaysians have no other choice, for the alternative is a slow but steady unravelling of the ties that bind us. Things may appear alright to some of us, but the damage is being done all the time.

I am reminded here of a line in Alan Paton's poignant and beautiful book, *Cry, the Beloved Country*: "Behind the polished panelling the white ant eats away the wood."

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