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50 Years of Malaysian Independence: Celebrate or Contemplate?

Kee Beng



At any one time, the problems facing a nation are multidimensional. Therefore, attempts at improving things need to start by cutting to the chase and identifying the salient negative aspects and conditions that afflict the country. By default, such a process must necessarily be conducted in a way that the citizenry easily understands, and can relate to.

When an attempt actually succeeds, it is in the nature of things that the points made are often characterised by simplicity, and yes, by how self-evident they seem to be.

On 3 April 2007, Raja Nazrin Shah, the crown prince of the Malaysian state of Perak, made a keynote speech to a roundtable of 150 young and youngish Malaysians gathered to discuss national unity at the Bar Council in Kuala Lumpur. The event was co-organised by the Centre for Public Policy Studies at the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute, and the National Young Lawyers Committee of the Malaysian Bar Council, two of the more vocal bodies in Malaysia at the moment.

What was striking about the prince's words that morning was that the points about nation building were issues Malaysians should have been conscious about all along. What was more significant, once they were said, was that the points raised very obviously required enunciation. The potential power of the prince's elegant presentation lay in the clear-eyed recognition of that need. Raja Nazrin realised that the bricks required for building a nation had been mislaid along the way, and Malaysians could do with some reflection and reminder.

Given the pessimism that many Malaysians feel about the political economy (notwithstanding the "feel good" atmosphere that Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi claims is evident in the country), the lack of confidence in the Prime Minister's ability to reform the country, and the discomfort about the de-secularisation of society - the voice of a non-partisan leader uttering simple truths can have far-reaching consequences.

Raja Nazrin's entry into the discussion promises to generate more participation about the nature and the state of Malaysia's nation-building narrative. He presented some guidelines that included the need for trust in the proclaimed nation building process, openness and tolerance throughout society, an accommodative practical sensibility, a willingness to confront problems, and an appropriate system of rewards and punishment. Albeit often heard perhaps, these are potent points nonetheless.

But what he mentioned first of all is something worth reiterating for the simple reason that it is so often forgotten. It is also what makes the speech so poignant, and that is that "Malaysians of all races, religions, and geographic locations need to believe *beyond a shadow of a doubt* (my italics) that they have a place under the Malaysian sun."

This insight gains power not through the fact that inter-ethnic relations have been worsening in recent years, but because it bravely directs attention to the worry that the 50-year-old country has been developing a stubbornly multi-tiered citizenry.

This tendency has to be stopped, he added, because "only when each citizen believes that he or she has a common home and is working towards a common destiny, will he or she make the sacrifices needed for the long haul." Should this condition go unmentioned, it cannot but continue unremedied, until something gives way.

The policy that has certainly had the most profound effect on how Malaysians relate to each other, how they perceive each other across ethnic lines, and how they view themselves and their future in the country must be the affirmative action program, the New Economic Policy (NEP). This was implemented in 1970 after racial riots the year before, and was originally meant to end in 1990.

Most were convinced at that time that such a programme was necessary if the multicultural country was to

survive as a single entity. However, the addition to its rationale that made it acceptable to most Malaysians was the caveat that redistribution of wealth should occur within a growing economy and never through confiscation.

In the 1973 mid-term review of the second Malaysian Plan, it was proclaimed that the goals of the NEP were to be undertaken "in the context of rapid structural change and expansion of the economy so as to ensure that no particular group experiences any loss or feels any sense of deprivation in the process."

This "no confiscation" principle was in practice a very tall order. The NEP is after all a wide socio-economic programme meant to rectify unhealthy conditions left behind by the colonial system. There was no way that no particular group would in the long run experience loss and a sense of deprivation.

What happened over the last 50 years, when various groups within the country made political compromises, bargained over each other's interests, ranked each other's agendas, and suppressed voices for the higher good as understood by certain leaders, is that Malaysians were left with limited knowledge about their own history. They know little about significant events in their past, have little reliable information about their present and former leaders, and long for viable alternative visions.

The result is a strategic disinterest among the young in the finer points of nation building, and widespread distrust of politicians, the very people who claim to be leading the nation building process.

This is the long-lasting heritage of the NEP. Many do feel a "sense of deprivation". To Raja Nazrin's credit, this is what he now points out. The fact that it comes from someone with no reason to have sensed any deprivation at all makes it all the more compelling.

As long as this "sense of deprivation" remains undiscussed, it will remain unresolved. In time, it is bound to find socially non-beneficial, if not violent, expression.

Seen in a larger context, Raja Nazrin's speech is part of a growing trend in Malaysia becoming more evident on the anniversary of the country's 50th year of Merdeka (a Malay word ubiquitously understood to mean independence). Reasons for celebration beyond the mere remembrance of liberation from colonial rule do not dominate. There is little optimism, and the "feel good" factor is weak. In fact, rumours of early general elections serve as a painful reminder of how segregated the country remains in many important dimensions. Lacking a sense of real unity, spontaneous rejoicing in the *Merdeka* anniversary remains rare.

Being unsure about what it is they are supposed to be celebrating, Malaysians experience a national anxiety, and are becoming more pensive than before. The good thing about this is that their skepticism may yet evolve into constructive activism. After sound contemplation, some change must come.

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