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Looking Back, Looking Forward

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PART ONE

Preface

On Being Human

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The Politics of Globalisation

Preface

If I were to state a First Law of history, it is that history does not teach us how to anticipate the future. The lesson we must learn is that the future will be full of surprises; the best we can do is to prepare ourselves to cope with the unexpected. In this essay, I am taking advantage of the spirit of renewal occasioned by the beginning of a new millennium on the Christian calendar, to share my thoughts as a Malaysian, and as a citizen of the world. I refer to the unpredictable historical routes that have brought us to our present situation. I am trying to identify new ways of thinking that are essential for the survival of the human race, as well as for the survival of our country.

On Being Human

In the centuries of human history, nations have emerged and disappeared, and populations have shifted. Great empires have collapsed, while small countries

became powerful. All our ancestors, at some time, have been the oppressors or the oppressed, the exploiters or the exploited. The human species has travelled a long distance in a few thousand years. Beyond that, we should look back with gratitude to our ancestors, the small African tribes that left Africa some 100 000 years ago, and spread all over the globe. These ancestors brought with them the gift of language, the institution of the family and the tribe, the inventions of fire and farming, enabling us to survive the hazardous journey to civilisation.

In the course of human civilization, our ancestors have belonged at different times to different tribes and held different faiths. They moved freely over the face of the earth for many thousands of years, until the emerging modern state shut its borders just a few hundred years ago. Our culture and cuisine, the way we dress and the words we speak, carry the imprints of our pluralistic pasts. We cling to trivial tokens of our differences, but we are all children of a remote African mother.

We have reached an era of extraordinary and rapid change, driven by technological advances that are transforming the way we live, and how we relate to one another. Stability is an illusion. Changes that were spread over a few centuries in Europe have happened within a few decades in Asia. Like astronauts in space, we are not aware how fast we are travelling.

The human race shares a common destiny - on 'spaceship earth' - in our precarious existence in an infinitely vast, indifferent, universe, on the fragile crust of this tiny planet - 'the third rock from the Sun'. Humanity has the capability to eliminate hunger and most diseases, and raise educational and cultural levels of all the peoples of the globe. We are incapable of performing these wonders because our technological achievements and skills have outstripped our moral capacities. Over a period of some ten thousand years, we have made huge technological strides, but our moral capacity remains at the level of the Palaeolithic family. The hi-tech modern world is not matched by an enhanced capacity to deal with the moral complexities that come with our new powers. We live in selfish, murderous societies. Masculine values have become dysfunctional in technologically driven societies. Humanity needs to intensify its feminine values to rescue it from calamity.

I am speaking not only of the morality of private life, but of ethical behaviour in human relations that we mould defiantly attach to our sense of what is right, just,

and fair. I have seen the collapse of communism, and I await the crisis of capitalism. Humanity has no future with social systems based on hate or greed.

Morally and ethically, we have responsibilities and obligations as members of the human race and citizens of the world, citizens of a State and members of a community, as well as belonging to a family. To each of these roles, we bring values, attitudes, and commitments, largely determined by ethnicity, religion, and education. These, you might say, are god-given. We share our parent's ethnicity and station in life, and with it their religion. What religion that is, depends on where and in what age your ancestors were born to be converted by persuasion, for rewards or by force, or out of sheer gratitude for a hand that was stretched out to help in a moment of need. Even those whose ancestors were converted by bribes or by force, have remained faithful.

We have good reason to be modest about ethnicity and religion. It is natural that our own religion appears so reasonable and sensible, whilst the strange faiths that others hold appear faintly ridiculous, if not irrational. Those who are over zealous in their separate faiths are likely to be of the same emotional temperament. There is a case for humility and forbearance.

Sharing the Earth

If globalization has a meaning, it is that we are One World - One People. Fast travel, swift communication, the pervasive access of mass media, and higher levels of education, has opened our hearts and minds to our common destiny on earth. However, what is on offer now is sham globalization. Poor nations look suspiciously at secretive negotiations inside the World Trade Organization, because they fear it brings back, in a new guise, the old colonial relationships. What passes off as globalization is a marketing tool of the powerful, to take commercial advantage of the weak. There is not to be free movement of people, no sharing of the burden of poverty or a fairer distribution of wealth, no global democracy, not even democracy in the functioning of the United Nations.

The obstacle to globalization is the modern state, with its utterly amoral pursuit of its interests. Powerful states are predatory on weaker states. In a world with an ever-widening gap between rich and poor countries, the task of the state is to retain and expand its share by any means.

Only late in life, have I come to recognize that the practice of politics is the art of deception in public life, and diplomacy is its extension to relations between nations. The functioning of the state needs politicians to cater for the dark side of human nature, to tell the necessary lies, and to mask with righteous indignation the acts of wickedness committed on our behalf. It follows that the public debate on global problems is hypocritical and deceptive; it treats the global audience as gullible and ignorant.

The antagonistic rivalries amongst states prevent the efficient and equitable mobilization of the limited resources of the world. There is enough to satisfy our need, said Gandhi, but not enough to satisfy our greed.

In the context of population growth and vast unmet expectations of the peoples of the world, the sharing of global resources is seen as a zero-sum game. The gap between rich and poor is widening, between nations as well as within nations. Within countries, the rich will fight to pass on their privileges to their children. In both developed and developing countries, the rich numb their conscience, live in private enclaves, work out of guarded towers, send their children to private schools, buy imported goods, seek treatment in exclusive hospitals, breathe air-conditioned air, and drink only bottled water. This is their response to living in a society with serious inequities and inequalities, where social solidarity has been sacrificed to economic growth, where a large underprivileged mass are at the walls of their private cities. There is an internal secession of the elite from the societies to which they belong. This is devastating to the cultural life of that society, and it undermines the transmission of the values and attitudes that are the underpinning of good citizenship.

The pursuit of privileged consumption, inspired and driven by the awesome power of Western media, has become the dominant cultural style across the 'wired' globe. Developed countries are heavy consumers of energy and raw materials. Meeting the demand for goods from rich consumers of the developed countries has generated much of the prosperity of developing countries.

The Western nightmare is the prospect that developing countries will try to join them as high consumers. Rapid growth in developing countries means increased consumption of grain and meat, and an increased demand for power and raw materials. The competition for global resources will sharpen as the people of

poor countries aspire to developed country standards of living. There is an ever-intensifying scramble for control of natural resources. We prepare for war.

The environment – ‘mother earth’ – will be subject to vastly increased depredation. It is not a matter of insufficient food. Malthus had it exactly wrong when he predicted that, as with animal populations, human numbers would outgrow food supply. It is over two centuries since Malthus wrote. In that time, world population has increased many times over, but the technology to increase food production has more than kept up. The prospects for producing food have never looked brighter, in spite of marked inefficiency in its distribution. What humanity lacks is the wisdom to share food justly, starting with those who are simply starving. The environmental crisis of over-population is not from food shortages, but from the effects of excessive consumption of a variety of goods and services by an overweight, indolent minority.

Additionally, in a profound sense, the inhuman scale of human existence threatens our sanity. Human beings are unfitted by evolution for life on the scale of the city; we are too crowded for a humane existence. Our species also occupies too much ecological space. We put ourselves in competition with all life on earth, so that all other life stands to benefit from our extinction. We have a limited span of life on a dirty, overcrowded earth, but we have insatiable greed to own and consume more, even if others go hungry within our sight – ‘another day in paradise’.

To save the global environment of this tiny globe that we perforce have to share, we have to learn to moderate consumption to sustainable levels. That means rediscovering the virtues and values of the simple life. To preserve our environment requires a moral leap of the imagination by individual consumers everywhere in the world. Talk of sustainable development is mostly a diversion, because it shifts attention to developing countries that have the longest way to go in development. Sustainable consumption, in fact, requires lifestyle changes that will be resisted. Those of us who consume an excess of power, prefer to righteously protest against generating power for new consumers. If we occupy old land, we are indignant about new land being opened for new homes. It is much more demanding on us, individually, to learn to share, to practice charity, and live the simple life.

Developed countries that had the advantage of economic growth at low cost at the expense of the environment now want poorer countries to exercise restraint in growth, and share the cost of repairing damage to the environment caused in past centuries by their rapid economic growth. The wealthy of the world will defend to the death of others, their right to wasteful and excessive consumption of global resources; wealthy nations will go to war.

From the 16th to the 19th century, Western populations grew rapidly. A predatory West, fuelled by a combination of aggressive nationalism and religious fanaticism, used its superior armaments to occupy all the Americas and Australia, virtually wiping out the native peoples.

The relations of power are such that the powerful will have their way with the weak. Western powers until now dominated the world. I am dismayed to see the return of 'gunboat diplomacy', half a century after the end of colonial regimes. Just as Athenian democracy, the Western model, did not preclude ownership of slaves, democracy in the West has thrived on the enslavement and exploitation of colonial peoples. The rise of China and India, and the reemergence of Russia, is changing the balance.

Last time round, Asia had a superior civilization, but the Europeans had superior armaments. This time round the West has even better armaments, and they have economic might as well. Therefore, we learn a frightful lesson: that the power to retaliate and inflict unacceptable pain on the threatening power is an essential condition for the preservation of national sovereignty. The Russians struggle to retain this capacity, the Chinese act on this assumption; the Indians are coming round to this view of the world, and the fractured Islamic world wish that were possible for them. We have made a bad beginning to the 21st century.

The Politics of Globalisation

In such a world, the pursuit of a just global society and global democracy, and the defence of human liberties everywhere, cannot be left to governments. We need movements of citizens that organize themselves globally, a safe distance away from the proprietary or sponsored non-governmental organizations that occupy the field today. Only community-based movements of concerned peoples

can influence governments about the positions they take on behalf of their countries. The Internet has made possible the creation and functioning of such a community. We need to organize global movements of citizens, if we are to solve global problems in a civilized manner.

Western governments will clamour for democracy in an unfriendly authoritarian state if the beneficiaries are people in the opposition who are beholden to their interests and investments. They will be protective of tyrannies where the regime is amenable to their direction. We have the spectacle of countries that oppressed and exploited others, now lecturing them on human rights. Yesterday's poachers want to be today's gamekeepers. The defeated nations of World War 2 are more circumspect; we do not see Japan lecturing China on the human rights of people in Shanghai, or Germany lecturing Israel on its treatment of the Palestinians.

At the heart of the problem is the United States of America. Early in the 20th century, the United States was persuaded that its interests lay in an unshakable alliance with the old European imperial powers. Untrue to its own revolutionary tradition, it turned its back on the freedom movements that initially drew inspiration from the American Revolution. The US chose to take the side of the submissive tyrants of the developing countries. The US government rebuffed Mao Tse Tung and supported Chiang Kai Shek, fought Ho Chi Minh and set up Ngo Dinh Diem in power, and sought to undermine Nehru, Sukarno and Nasser. So it goes on till today with a new set of model tyrants for the Western-controlled media to exalt and glorify.

The future of the globe over the next half-century will be greatly influenced by the role the US plays in international affairs. It believes that to retain its excessive share of consumption – 5% of the world's population consuming 25 per cent of its wealth – it needs to maintain permanent military domination of the globe. There is no military threat to its global dominance, yet it behaves like a guilty, insecure people under threat. It is driven by serious economic inequities but is indifferent to them. It has a broken down infrastructure but prefers to invest in the military-industrial complex. It has immense social problems, but sends its poorly educated youth to fight in other lands.

The US also generates a vibrant popular culture that has unrivalled dominance over the hearts of our children. It leads the world in technology, and its graduate

schools are the finest. The Americans are the most dynamic society in the world with a brilliant capacity for innovation. They have an amazing capacity to attract and nurture talented people from anywhere in the world. And they dominate the Internet. In the United States, we see a testing bed for all our possible futures.

The world is full of potential friends, yet what does it do? It projects arrogance and intolerance. The USA goes round the globe playing the bully, conscientiously working to make enemies, whilst the Europeans play the good guy, and the Japanese search for a part for themselves. America has lost its moral vision, and the message it broadcasts to the world is that greed is good for you, but their greed takes priority. A great nation with a desperate craving for a great enemy to confront is a danger to the world.

It may be just that their foreign policy is still driven by surviving old men and their technicians, who are addicted to the adrenaline-highs of the 'cold war'. The 60's generation has been a disappointment. The demonstrations at Seattle against the World Trade Organization, proclaim the arrival of a new generation in the USA with new values and attitudes. Perhaps they will learn to direct their energies, intelligently and constructively into global concerns. Meanwhile, it is best that the Russians, the Chinese, the Indians, and the world of Islam, keep their cool, and small nations should mind their step.

If the United States were to suffer a great economic depression and a persistent decline in its standards of living, American politics can turn very nasty. The ingredients already exist in their society for the rise of right wing, anti-democratic movements, whose ideas could spread like wildfire to the rest of a world that also has been dragged down into a depression. Democracy is a fragile growth, imperfect everywhere, and if it came under threat in the US, then it is in danger everywhere. There is also the likelihood of a contrary reaction. The US also has a strong populist tradition. With an economic recession, I envisage powerful movements emerging that would stand for a more just and egalitarian society. That too could spread globally. As before in history, the contradictions and conflicts within a dominant civilization, will be reflected in the world, in new ways of thinking and in new ideologies.

The influence of Western culture, technology, and lifestyle permeate our lives, and western political institutions are the models for developing countries.

Nationalist movements, in their struggle for freedom, fought to win for their own people, the historic advances in human rights, soon after they were won in the West. The most important acquisition was the idea of a government formed by representatives of citizens, elected through universal suffrage. Two other important concepts were of a permanent, professional civil service and an independent judiciary, and of self-regulating bodies of the professions.

Conscienceless elites have taken over from the occupying colonial powers in the developing countries. They struggle to sustain gross disparities in the distribution of wealth that are incompatible with democracy. These cosmopolitan elite aspire to mimic Western lifestyles.

In public life, many in an older generation still suffer from a postcolonial hangover. You notice cultural cringe. It takes at least half a century after the end of colonial rule for a new generation to take over, whose terms of reference are not all derived from the colonial experience, and who think in the language of their own people. Their evolution into an educated middle class with close links to their people is a prerequisite for progress. The way forward will be tortuous and painful, but it will produce a cultural revival, which will enrich global culture, that will open minds to rationality, and produce an intellectual climate that is supportive of the development of science and technology. Nowhere is this happening faster than in our own region.

PART TWO

The Malaysian Dilemma

Ethnic Politics to 'divide and rule'

The Failure of Nation Building

The Politics of Race

Reinventing Malaysia

The Malaysian Dilemma

Malaysia is in a strategically important region. To the east is China, and to the west, India. To the north are the countries of Indochina, and to the south are the Indonesian archipelago and Australia. The peninsula lies athwart the Straits of Malacca that links the Pacific and Indian Oceans. We are at the heart of the ASEAN region where our future lies. The ten nations of ASEAN have grown

very rapidly through external trade, but they have developed neither a common political culture nor a shared vision of their future. Like the rest of Asia, we have still to make the transition from a postcolonial entity to a national identity.

ASEAN is one of the fastest growing economic zones in the world, but the benefits of economic growth are distributed unevenly, and large numbers remain in poverty. The main beneficiaries have been urban populations. It is likely that metropolitan Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur-Petaling Jaya, central Jakarta, and Manila, like the city-state of Singapore, enjoy per-capita incomes that approach those of developed countries, but ASEAN has remained backward, socially, culturally, and politically. We have failed to develop the cultural infrastructure to sustain democracy, so that what passes off as elected governments, are camouflage for squalid tyrannies. You could look back at the past three decades as the economic golden age of ASEAN, but spiritually and culturally, these are still the dark ages, nevertheless the outlook for Malaysia is exceptionally bright.

Malaysians have a sense of wonder and gratitude that this is their country: a green land of breathtaking vistas, not subject to typhoons or earthquakes, without volcanoes, or deserts. We are rich in natural resources, and richer still in talented people. No great mountains and no great rivers, but we do have the greatest cuisine in the world. Our region has centuries of history as the home of trading nations. Malacca is the original free market of the world, where traders came from many nations to buy and sell. We are a small country, a separate country by accident, invented to meet the strategic needs of Britain, and historically the outcome of casually contrived compromises between European powers.

Our country is at the confluence of old civilizations that are mature and tolerant – Indonesian, Chinese, and Indian – and they have profoundly determined our cultural heritage. In recent centuries, the impacts of Arab Islam and Christian Europe have shaped modern Malaysia. We are the better off for having travelled with light cultural baggage, freely taking what we needed from the civilizations with which we have interacted over the past one thousand years.

Malaysia's strength is its cultural diversity, our common inheritances that give this country its distinctive character. We are a nation of nations, who are discovering a shared destiny as one people. Our people bring complementary talents to the task of growing up together as a nation. We have a rich spiritual

heritage. Although religion elsewhere in the world has been used as a vehicle for hate and intolerance, religion in Malaysia has been a benign influence. From universalistic Islam, we learn of the equality of human beings, and to regard personal wealth as being held in trust. From gentle Buddhism, we learn the importance of good conduct, and to restrain our attachment to material possessions. From the sage Confucius, we learn the virtue of decorum, and of the importance of the family. From contemporary Christianity, we learn that we must love our neighbour, and to care for the poor. From Hindu philosophy, we learn that diverse spiritual paths lead to the same ultimate reality, and that we have the right only to morally correct action, and not to its fruits. We are a truly fortunate people. We should celebrate our diversity.

We have made astonishing economic progress. This country can reasonably aspire to enjoy the quality of life of some developed countries within the next 20-30 years. That makes it a shining star among developing countries.

I offer two more observations of our society as tokens of an even more impressive success. First, conventional wisdom had it that if growth rates in Malaysia fell below 4 per cent, ethnic conflict was inevitable. In fact, we have had minus growth during the recent Asian economic crisis, but there was no ethnic tension and no political party sought to exploit ethnic issues. If your car breaks down anywhere in this country even in the most remote parts, irrespective of your ethnicity, you may confidently go to the nearest home and be certain of receiving help and hospitality. Malaysians are an incredibly hospitable people. My second observation is that, in the midst of an economic recession and unprecedented political conflict, it is still possible for a prime minister of Malaysia to hold open house, to personally greet thousands of visitors. This is universally our custom, that on festive days, anyone can walk in unannounced to any home, and will be made to feel welcome. Can you think of any other country in this region, or in the whole world, where this is possible? In spite of our politicians, we have done well. Now, that is something to be proud of. It is a tribute to the wisdom and tolerance of our people.

So why are we in trouble?

Ethnic Politics to ‘divide and rule’

Malaysian politics is the entrenched politics of race. All channels for Parliamentary politics are through race-based parties. Since independence, the components of the ruling coalition have projected themselves as fighting for the rights of their respective communities. Their mirror image is reflected in the opposition parties. Every country in the world has some form of ethnic differences, many more severe than Malaysia’s problems. In those countries too, politicians have made a small living out of exploiting ethnic conflict. However, in those countries, the dominant leadership at least, have projected themselves as leaders of all the people. In this country, ethnic issues have been blown up to gargantuan proportions, and nowhere have politicians prospered so well by nurturing ethnic politics.

The origin of race politics in Malaysia goes back to the years before independence. The British colonial power was faced with a multiracial nationalist movement that was anti-British and under the influence of the communists. The British responded very successfully by mobilizing the Malay feudal families and the Chinese trading community, into race-based political parties as champions of the rights of their respective communities. The Malays were promised an entrenched special position with the civil service in their hands. The Chinese and the Indians were promised free access to economic opportunities. Racial politics took root.

The Alliance of Malay, Chinese, and Indian racial parties, whom the British nurtured, thrived under the umbrella of colonial laws that strictly regulated the Press and allowed indefinite detention without trial of their opponents. The colonial power harassed the nationalist movement and nurtured their collaborators to receive power. This is the background to the racial formula of the ruling coalition, and explains why civil liberties are not on their agenda. With the colonial laws at their disposal to use, dissension within the ruling coalition as well as outside could be brutally suppressed. Opposition politics is regarded as near treason. In the decade after independence, faced with a serious electoral challenge from a multi-racial, left wing opposition, these police powers were used to destroy them. That was the starting point, and what we see today, is a continuation of the same pattern of repression

Paradoxically, at the same time in urban English-medium schools, British teachers were playing a contrary role. British teachers were culturally and educationally the best of the British that came to Malaysia; after that, it was all the way down to the civil service, and uneducated British in the plantations. These teachers were urging a sense of nationhood on the young minds under their care. Many of them are remembered with affection. After independence, the mainstream in the professions and the civil service, who were mostly English-educated, were comfortable across ethnic cultures and had good friends of all races. That generation has passed from the political scene.

The need to create an educated Malay middle class and, to bring them into commerce and industry, was recognized by all sections of Malaysian society. Universally there is support for this because the Malays were neglected educationally by colonial policy, and did not benefit from the economic growth of the first half for of the 20th century. This remains a matter of concern to all Malaysians, although it had been optimistically anticipated that the handicap would be remedied within a decade of independence.

Only a small proportion of the national product can be set aside, in practice, to achieve social justice. The mistake is to divert it mainly to subsidize the emergence of a few Malay billionaires, instead of investing in education of the new generation, and into supporting emerging Malay entrepreneurs in small and medium industries. The theory was that if you fed the best quality grain to the horses, you got better quality manure for the grass. It did not work out that way. The creation of handpicked Malay 'bureaucratic capitalists' to take over and own productive assets of the state, resulted in risk-taking behaviour without personal risk. We have seen the outcome.

The Failure of Nation Building

From the perspective of national unity and nation building, the most important task that confronted the educational system at independence, was to remedy the inferior educational outcomes of rural schools, which was the cause of the educational backwardness of young Malays. There was nothing of greater consequence to our future as a nation. Yet over forty years of educational investment have yielded dismal educational outcomes, and produced several generations of school-dropouts with serious social problems. No one takes

responsibility for this failure. The truth is that rural education, like rural health, is a poor second to education and health in Kuala Lumpur and the main cities, where the wealthy elite have their homes.

Several generations of young people have grown up in an atmosphere of race politics that is poisonous to the idea of being a Malaysian. In schools and universities, young people separate into ethnic cliques. Few friendships are made across the ethnic divide. Young people are emerging from the universities, poor in skills, shallow in knowledge, narrow-minded, intolerant, and bigoted. This is the pool from which we draw our teachers, administrators, and professionals. Ethnic policies have prevented many brilliant young Malaysians from contributing to their fullest, and have driven others abroad to find a home for their talents. An iron curtain has descended among young people who are our hope for the future. We have polluted the springs of our nationhood.

Ethnic communities have withdrawn into their own cultural reserves, where they sustain a vigorous ethnic civil society. There is no forum for sharing our cultures, and the only common cultural activities are for Western culture amongst the English-educated minority. Within each ethnic ghetto, our young men and women single-mindedly pursue wealth and status. Our children are learning to survive in the world we created for them.

Whilst our political institutions remained stagnant, our country has changed as our versatile people respond to urbanization, industrialization, and to the onrush of information technology. Our people are familiar with the outside world; many have travelled abroad, or have been educated abroad. A growing number have been to university, and, happily, a large proportion of them are women. The media brings news of a swiftly changing world into every sitting room. We are a very different people from fifty years ago. The country has changed, but as elsewhere in the world, the politicians are the last to notice. On all sides, they scramble to adapt to the new circumstances that they have yet to comprehend.

The price of over-rapid prosperity has been the emergence of a new middle class, composed of all races, that is culturally impoverished and without a conscience. They disdain to accept the cultures of the other ethnic groups, adopting instead a mimic Western culture as their common ground. They have no values, but can put a price to everything. Friendships give way to 'useful contacts', altruism is

regarded as foolishness and compassion is seen as a weakness. They comfortably embrace corrupt practices, so that corruption permeates all parts of public life, and contaminates private life. There is total cynicism towards the possibility of virtuous conduct in public life. Intellectuals, mainly children of the same elite, have betrayed their mission, no longer articulating our conscience, or being sources of independent opinion and expertise. They are, instead, ‘guns for hire’, available to fluently defend the indefensible. Now the judiciary has been contaminated.

It is not surprising that corruption has flourished, that politicians felt safe to invest all their energies into making themselves rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Corruption has been institutionalized so that civil society is dominated by the successful corrupt. Corruption overflows, trickles down. Civil servants had the example of their political masters. The existence of wide discretionary powers and administrative law made the temptation of easy money irresistible. To many businessmen, corruption was a bizarre blessing, because decisions could be expedited at modest extra cost. ‘Nothing is easy, but nothing is impossible’.

To change this corrupt environment requires much more than laws. It requires a rediscovery of moral values. We desperately need examples, models in public life to emulate. Nothing would be more powerful as an example to all of us, than if you could safely assume that a good Muslim in public office, say a judge, was incorruptible, and could be trusted to be impartial. Most of us could think of *one* example of an honest politician whose religious faith keeps him honest, and there must be others, but it takes an effort to think of another one.

Clearly, we do some things right, we do some things well, and this is after all the season for millennial self-congratulation. I want, instead, to speak of our failures and of the grave dangers that lie ahead. I am proposing that we reconsider our approaches to building a Malaysian nation. I shall share my ideas on our country, the problems we have created for ourselves, and suggest some ways we can reconstruct Malaysia –re-invent Malaysia – for the very challenging times ahead of us.

I shall argue for the need for serious changes if we are to progress as a people, to take full advantage of technological advances, and to fulfil our part of the responsibility for the globe that we share with six billion other people. My limited purpose in this essay is to discuss the critically important issues that confront our

country. I wish to share my ideas on the way forward that we should follow. I believe that the stakes are great.

The Politics of Race

I must say that the race-based formula to govern Malaysia has, until now, worked out better than could have been anticipated from the experiences of other countries – at the cost of our freedoms. We had two opportunities to move away from race-based political parties. Once was when the avuncular Tengku, who was loved and popular, was our first Prime Minister. He was politically very strong at the beginning of his long term, and he could have got away with a lot, except that the Malays were very insecure at that time. The second opportunity came in the prosperous nineties, except that everyone was too busy making money to worry about the future.

Nor have we had much luck with visionary statesmen. Onn Jaafar, the founder of UMNO, a statesman ahead of his time and a Malay patriot, felt that the interests of the Malays would be best served by their leading a single multiracial governing party. The people who were to provide that leadership – the divisional heads of UMNO – rejected him. Mahathir has projected a vision of a developed country led by Malay managers and industrialists, but educated Malays who were to play that role, appear to be spurning this vision. The modernizing thrust in Malaysian politics has stalled.

The stability of the governing coalition has depended on the power of UMNO to regulate the behaviour of the other race-based parties in the coalition. UMNO could do this by virtue of its strength in the constituencies that returned its non-Malay camp followers. So long as UMNO could deliver the Malay vote, discipline could be maintained in the coalition. If the Malay vote can no longer be taken for granted, we face an entirely new scenario.

The deep split in UMNO, arising from the expulsion and trial of Anwar Ibrahim, could not be handled in the customary manner, by detention without trial and banning publications and organisations. Anwar Ibrahim's defiant stance has profoundly divided the Malay establishment, marking a historic sociological transformation that has been in gestation over several decades. It has enabled the

emergence of a new coalition of opposition forces. Vigorous use of the repressive machinery of the state is constrained because Anwar Ibrahim has captured the imagination of a weary, disgusted people, and he has very powerful friends in the West, and the attention of supportive Western media. If only he could be presented as a 'left wing, anti-American, Islamic extremist', he would have been destroyed very swiftly, with little fuss.

We are witnessing a battle for the control of 'UMNO Incorporated', the heart of the conflict is the control of UMNO, and the opportunities for great wealth that it offers. There is now an establishment constituency for human rights. Some of those who were once strong supporters of the ruling coalition are discovering, in opposition, the vocabulary of human rights. The truth is that we are a trading nation, and the wealth of our ruling class is very dependent on exports, the stock market, and foreign investment. Therefore, our political masters, at this time, have perforce to restrain their normal reflex response to the sight and smell of opposition.

In the new political environment, it has become possible for an opposition alliance to effectively mobilize public opinion. Faced with massive disenchantment, it remains to be seen what strategy UMNO will use to rehabilitate itself. UMNO remains important but it has been deprived of its traditional weapons; it has been outbid on religion, appeals to racial sentiment could backfire, the threat of rioting would hurt their own economic interests, the Communists are no longer around to be a target, and Singapore is a poor substitute. The future course of Malaysian politics will hinge on how UMNO will adapt to the new environment.

Partai Islam, which is the core of the opposition, has been surprisingly astute in reassuring the non-Malays that their way of life would not be affected. They point, very effectively to the experience of non-Muslims in the state of Kelantan that they govern. Consequently, the DAP is willing to take a risk with its non-Muslim Chinese constituency by allying with the Partai Islam. The coalition may not last, but a thaw has set in. and no way will Malaysians agree to back into political deep-freeze. Partai Islam has made a dent on non-Malay suspicions regarding their true intentions. It is uncertain if they possess the faith and endurance to persevere in the historic task that they have taken upon themselves, to show to unbelievers the Islamic way to a new ideal in organizing society.

The danger always exists of conflicts of interests over wealth-generating opportunities being transformed into ethnic issues. I have in mind competition between big business interests or the career rivalries of employees in the public sector (including the universities) turning vicious and being elevated into a conflict of ethnic interests. The existence of a core of trusted persons in and outside politics is requisite to reassure our people on the rightness of major initiatives for change.

Reinventing Malaysia

We must have genuine multiracial coalitions in government and in opposition, as prelude to the emergence of dominant parties that include all races in their membership. For that to happen it must become clear to politicians that no more can any political party claim to be the sole spokesman for an ethnic community. That is a possible outcome of the present political crisis. It is the historic task of the majority community to set an example, to take the lead. We need the Malays, as the majority of voters to provide the leadership of both the governing coalition, as well as the opposition party coalition. Malay self-confidence in their ability to lead a multiracial state is the crux, and it is contingent on their educational and economic advancement. The Malay genius for political leadership may yet prove itself in the leadership of a plural society.

The role of government has to change. It has become the agency for private wealth creation. Its proper role is to look after the interests of the whole people, in particular those who need help to take advantage of available opportunities. The very difficult task that every developing country faces is to establish a state that is neutral between ethnic populations; this is prerequisite for the survival of the modern state. The state that cannot do that does not deserve to survive. The other task is to move beyond elite control of government to a participatory democracy. We need devolution of power to local authorities based on town-and-country units. That is where citizens can take responsibility for their own communities, as they have traditionally done, and can learn from their mistakes.

The State must encourage and actively support civic activity that brings together all ethnic groups. Existing professional organizations already provide such a model. The concept has to be extended to cultural and sporting organizations.

Government should preferentially fund activities that transcend ethnicity. In the same spirit, support for business should be directed towards encouraging multiracial enterprises.

Internationally, Malaysia has to lead ASEAN into strategic alliances with China and India, while constructing multiple links for technological development with the developed countries - USA and Japan, the United Kingdom and Europe. Our relations with Singapore and Australia have to be placed on a sensible, stable and constructive basis.

A preoccupation with education is the quintessential Asian value. Malaysian parents are obsessed with the educational performance of their children, and are willing to make great sacrifices to ensure this. There is a large national constituency in support of investment in education.

Malaysia needs massive investment in education. For any developing country, the most important occupation is that of the teacher. It is a measure of mistaken policies that teaching is a lowly regarded and poorly rewarded occupation. State-run schools have such poor reputations that a private school industry – from kindergarten to university – is flourishing to meet the demand for an alternative. Not even the universities can retain the best people in their service, and foreign universities have entered the business of providing tertiary education. The most rewarding profession is perceived to be that of the politician. When young people regard as their role models, not their teachers, but the politicians they read about, then you know we are deep in trouble.

We need quality in teaching, and good educational outcomes. The country must tighten its belt, and single-mindedly set about creating the finest schools in the world, particularly in the rural areas. The emphasis has to shift from awarding contracts for buildings and acquiring state land. Every country needs a few monumental structures, but for schools, as for hospitals and research institutes, you use comfortable, economical shells that can be replaced in response to the requirements of new technology. Our money should go towards getting the best teachers, and for the best teaching technology.

This new model school will be multiethnic, and incorporate all language streams in one place so that children interact in social, cultural, and sporting activities.

Our best skills should be used to create a cooperative spirit amongst young people, and encourage friendships between them. The teaching staff and the governing board would be judged on the performance of the students, and on their success in fostering a Malaysian identity. This would be an environment where Malay is the common language, and fluency in English is ensured. Those who wish to be educated in selected subjects in their mother tongues may do so in a superb environment. It is without doubt a very difficult beginning to make. I believe that the key to success is to make the schools so very good that they are irresistible to a majority of parents.

The funding and administration of the Universities should be entrusted to a Universities Commission, with a governing body appointed by parliamentary consensus, and receiving under the Constitution, a fixed proportion of the national budget. The universities should be able to recruit the best people from anywhere in the world to fulfil their responsibilities in teaching and research.

A parallel Research Corporation should fund and direct research through a chain of national research laboratories that recruit internationally. It is vital to form close links with graduate schools and research institutes abroad, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. Malaysia has to make very large investments internationally in the bright young minds that are generating advanced technology, so that we can keep track of new technology trends and development.

The impact of technology will transform our lives. Those who are unequipped to take advantage of the exciting new opportunities provided by technological advances, are condemned to poverty and backwardness. The most important resource we need to develop is our citizens. By importing large numbers of unskilled workers, we depress the incomes of Malaysians at the bottom of the economic pile to the benefit of influential but inefficient manufacturers. The availability of cheap migrant labour also retards the move up to technology-intensive industries.

To develop an indigenous capacity in science and technology, we need to attract highly skilled people to our shores. We should abandon policies that keep wages low by importing unskilled foreign labour. We need a variety of skills, including teachers and scientist. Good people are in short supply everywhere, and the best are in high demand in developed countries. Many foreign experts like the quality

of life in this country, and they like our people; some might work here for less than they might get in a developed country. Without altering ethnic demography, we have to go all out to make Malaysia attractive to some of the best minds in the world.

A common culture emerges after a very long period of interaction and cultural intercourse between nations. Where there is compulsion, there is resistance. Our society needs a culture of tolerance. A distinction has to be made between private and public space. We need freedom in our private space to conform to our own moral standards, but in public space, we respect the moral sensitivities of others. We should always be on the side of tolerance of behaviour that is not harmful to others. On this basis, we should actively involve ourselves in the social and cultural life of other ethnic groups.

Malaysians are unaccustomed to open debate of issues in the Press or in the public forum. We have had the politics of threat, to which has been added the politics of abuse. Our people deserve to be treated with respect for their intelligence and judgment. We need rational, informed, and constructive debate and discussion of the issues facing our country.

That brings me to the importance of an independent press. With an educated people, we need the profession of journalism to be skilled and conscientious. Professional journalists should be the moderators of debate and discussion amongst the public, referee the conflict of expert opinion, and fairly and accurately report what is news. They have to avoid the temptation to jump in the ring, to make news themselves or to distort news to influence public opinion.

There has been a surge of energy in government and some good ideas, in response to the challenge of a serious opposition that has to be met in the next elections. Malaysia may be on the way to becoming a normal parliamentary democracy. This may mean more corrupt politicians, and more foreign intelligence manipulation. It could also mean a plurality of opinions in public life, the emergence of civic activity across ethnic lines, and freeing of the energy and intellect of our people.