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# Towards a Nation of Cultured People

*Rajakumar MK. Towards a nation of cultured people. The Star. Sunday, January 2, 2000*

Malaysians share a sense of wonder and gratitude that this is their country. Located at the confluence of old civilisations that are mature and tolerant – Indonesian, Chinese, and Indian – which have profoundly determined our cultural heritage, the region has centuries of history as the home of trading nations.

Malacca is arguably the original free market of the world, where traders came from many nations to buy and sell. In recent centuries, the impact of Islam and Christian Europe has shaped modern Malaysia.

With the successes in more recent times, we can take pride in our economic progress. This country can reasonably aspire to enjoy the quality of life of some developed countries within the next 20 to 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%, ethnic conflict was inevitable. In fact, we have had minus growth, but there was no ethnic tension and no political party sought to exploit ethnic issues. 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 greet thousands of visitors to his home. 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 that is possible? Now, that is something to be proud of. It is a tribute to the wisdom and tolerance of our people.

## **Race-based Formula**

Malaysian politics is the 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. Several generations of young people have grown up in this 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. There are young people emerging from the universities, poor in skills, narrow in knowledge, intolerant, and bigoted. 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.

The origin of race politics in Malaysia goes back to the years before independence. The British were faced with an anti-British nationalist movement that was under the influence of the communists. The British responded very successfully by mobilising the Malay feudal families and the Chinese trading community as champions of the rights of their communities. The Malays were promised an entrenched special position with the civil service in their hands. The Chinese and the Indians were promised economic opportunities. That was the end of non-racial politics.

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 acknowledged by all groups. This was a matter of concern to all Malaysians. Universally, there is support for this because the Malays did not benefit from the economic growth of the first half of the last century.

The race-based formula to govern Malaysia has worked out better than could have been anticipated from the experience of other countries. We had two opportunities to move away from race-based political parties.

Once was during the time of the avuncular Tunku Abdul Rahman, our first Prime Minister. He was so loved and popular at the beginning of his long term that he

could have got away with anything, except that the Malays were insecure at that time.

The second opportunity came in the prosperous 1980s, except that everyone was too busy making money to worry about the future. What to do? As Malaysia moves towards a “normal” parliamentary democracy, 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 the people.

We must have genuine multiracial coalitions in government and in opposition as a prelude to the emergence of 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 a community. The majority community has to set an example, has to take the lead. Malay self-confidence in their ability to lead a multiracial state is the crux and it is contingent on their educational and economic advancement.

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 a poor reputation that a private school industry is flourishing to meet 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 in deep trouble.

The country must tighten its belt and single-mindedly set about creating the finest schools in the world, particularly in the rural areas. The money should go towards getting the best teachers and for the best teaching technology. This school should incorporate all language streams in one place so that they interact in social, cultural, and sporting activities. This would be an environment where Malay is the common language but those who wish to be educated in their mother tongues may do so in a superb environment.

A very difficult beginning to make, but there are signs that there already is some thinking in the government along these lines. I believe that the key to success is to make the schools so very good that they are irresistible to a majority of parents.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have neglected the universities and research. The continuing loss of staff, and the pressure on remaining staff for unplanned expansion, has badly damaged teaching and research. It is not just a matter of pay. University appointments are often political appointments, more commissar than academic. The best people do not flourish in such an atmosphere. The administration of the universities should be shifted to a universities commission, with a governing body appointed by parliamentary consensus, and receiving a fixed proportion of the national Budget. A parallel research corporation should fund and direct research through a chain of national research laboratories.

We need strategic alliances in technology development with the United Kingdom, China and India. Our universities and research institutes must also link up with their counterparts in the United States, Japan and Europe. Massive funds have to be available for investment in promising technology companies within and outside the country.

The most important resource we need to develop is our citizens. We will need to attract foreign talent 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 scientists. Without altering ethnic demography, we have to go all out to make Malaysia attractive to some of the best minds in the world.

### **Local responsibility**

The role of government has to change. We need devolution of power to local authorities based on a town-and country unit. This is where citizens can take responsibility for their own communities, as they have traditionally done, and learn from their mistakes.

There has been a surge of energy in government and some good ideas, particularly in education, in response to the challenge of a serious opposition that has to be met head on in elections. As Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen has

observed, famines do not occur in democracies because governments are held responsible by the electorate. That might work for us, too.

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. Journalists should be the moderators of debate and discussion among the public, referee the conflict of expert opinion, and fairly and accurately report what is news. They have to avoid the temptation to jump into the ring, to make news themselves, or to shape public opinion.

Malaysia is at a crossroad. The world is at the threshold of technological leaps that will take us to the borders of the miraculous and the magical. Only a highly-educated people can participate in the new world that is unfolding before our eyes. We have to leave behind the senseless conflicts that belong to our past. We have to set our sights very high, to become a nation of culture, education and skills. We have to look for better quality people in public life.

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