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Diversity is the reality, unity the dream

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I ATTENDED last week the conference on National Unity: From Vision to Action jointly organised by Yayasan 1Malaysia and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies. The invited speakers and participants comprised young people below 40. The moderators of the two panels and three workshops were older, averaging 65 years of age. A generational divide some would say.

Certainly in their discussions, the groups presented diverse views depending on their background and experience. The young politicians in the panels – Teo Nie Ching (DAP), Khairy Jamaluddin (Umno), Masiung Banah (Upko) and Yusmadi Mohd Yusoff (PKR) made impassioned appeals for more serious efforts to forge unity.

A heightened cultural and religious understanding, a new social contract underpinned by a unified education system, sincerity in power sharing in the nation's leadership, an empathetic justice system, greater interaction and collaborative entrepreneurship were the calls made by them.

The workshop participants were no less vocal in discussing the obstacles to national unity. They were united in decrying the negative impact of divisive politics and the unbridled ethno-racial chauvinism exacerbated by irresponsible political rhetoric and irrational discourse.

It was agreed that it is natural for people to polarise towards their own socio-cultural groupings with its attendant practices, customs and traditions. However, it becomes incumbent upon every Malaysian to break the silos that encourage segregation in their organisations and communities if they are serious about achieving unity.

In the summing up, Prof Chandra Muzaffar appealed for more substantive analyses of national unity matters where ethnic issues are handled with honesty, sincerity and fairness. Integration with integrity are indeed values which the nation must seriously espouse.

I share Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon's argumentation for harmony in diversity. Implicit in the concept of national unity is the belief that there is a common path – one that holds shared values and aspirations among people of diverse socio-cultural orientations. The journey towards unity and its twin concept of peace is best undertaken when people accept one another's differences and strive to define their common goals as a nation.

Building a national identity must necessarily be seen as the process of consolidating our multiple identities as individuals and as members of the groups we belong to – be it ethnic, community,

religious, professional or political. What better way to forge greater understanding than to engage one another in open and honest ways, with empathy and compassion.

While fulfilling our roles and responsibilities within our own communities, we are contributing to the nation in constructive and resourceful ways. While we are proud to uphold our ethnic and religious values and traditions, we stand tall in upholding the honour and integrity of our nation.

We are secure in our identity as Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans, Kadazans, Dayaks and Eurasians just as there is solidarity in our identity as Malaysians. What is most urgent is for Malaysians to be united by a common national vision.

The bonding among diverse groups will then be sealed through a common destiny. What we must do at the individual, organisational and community levels is to look deep within our own resources and strengths and share them with others. Our talk and walk must be inclusive. We must be prepared to accept one another's differences. We must engage one another in meaningful ways.

Our concern for the integral values and principles of democracy and egalitarianism must unite us as we seek societal justice, equity and fairness. We must rid ourselves of the tendency to be biased or exclusive.

As we strive to mend the fragile boundaries of race, religion and regionalism we must advocate policies that build strong bridges between people and communities. Activities and programmes addressing issues of national concern in education, the economy, culture and religion, the law, politics and government must be put in the hands of leaders and role models who uphold the values of peace and undertake their duties and responsibilities with a conscience. The voices of reason must prevail over the rumblings of discontent.

Perhaps what must be seriously established are new criteria for leadership roles, starting with the elected members of parliament – the people's representatives – who must answer a set of questions, for instance "How many friends of another race do you have?" or "How many times have you sat down to eat with people of other ethnic groups?" or "What other religions do you know apart from your own?" or "What are the practices of another ethnic group or religion that you are most fascinated by?"

From the questionnaires, the leaders of political parties can extract a taxonomy of attributes of each aspiring candidate to select the "winnable" ones for the next general election. Only then will Malaysians be convinced that national unity has a chance of becoming a reality in their lifetime.

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