

COMMENT

Preserving our multiculturalism

AT THE CROSSROADS:

Malaysians will do well not to take for granted their unity and diversity in challenging times

LAST week, I met an American friend who was with the large contingent accompanying visiting United States President Barack Obama. As a business executive, he travels frequently to, and has lived and worked in the region for many years. He speaks two Asian languages fluently.

Of all the places he has been for work, his stay in Malaysia is still the one that he remembers most fondly, not least for its multiculturalism. It is the least boring place he has lived in, he says. Being from the US, a country itself open to cultures from

around the world, this says something.

I do not want to delve into our often repeated but imperfect history. Suffice it to say that there was a time when, by dint of necessity and government policy, waves of peoples came to our shores to seek work, settle and enjoy a better life.

Early movers benefited greatly, while later ones faced increasing restrictions given the increasing sensitivity of the ethnic balance. For a long time after our independence, immigration policies were tightly controlled and remain so, at least on paper, today.

If you were in Bukit Bintang last weekend, you would have been one of the unfortunates caught in the traffic snarl. (I can understand why certain roads may have to be closed but not why dozens of policemen stand idly by while cars

jump lights and cut queues)

In any case, you would have had plenty of time to make interesting observations. Apart from the hordes of tourists, Middle East-



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Malaysians should actively defend their heritage.

erners plied their food and grocery trade, South Asian children ran up to cars to sell flowers, while the odd local prostitutes watched warily for their next customer.

It was most certainly multi-cultural and would have been quite

festive were it not for the dark and dingy (quite appalling really) conditions and the looks of quiet desperation.

A mere stone's throw away, the bright lights of shopping malls beckoned with their opulence and

nouveau riche.

Regardless, the fact that Malaysia is home (whether legally or illegally) to those from many countries around the world speaks volumes. While cynical

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Malaysians seem ever ready to dump on her at every opportunity, there are others who see this multicultural country as a treasure trove.

I was in Seoul, South Korea, early last week, a country that I hold in awe and admiration for their achievements. While the nation was in mourning over the terrible ferry disaster that took the lives of hundreds of their young, the city was a bustling streamlined metropolis, full of energy and optimism.

This was evident in the upmarket districts of Apgujeong and Cheongdam to the traditional local markets of Gwangjang and Dongdaemun. In Itaewon, you can snack on Middle Eastern kebabs and South Asian curries served up by the nationals of their respective countries.

Yet for all these advantages, thousands of South Koreans choose to make Malaysia, along with Australia and the US, their home and contribute. We can debate the reasons all day long but the evidence speaks louder than any theories we may have.

For all of this, we seem absolutely determined to destroy the treasure that has become multicultural Malaysia. Some segments see it as their life's dream and are unequivocally resolute to impose their brand of particularism, no matter what others think or want and at whatever cost.

Policies and practices aimed at the very heart of our multiculturalism, those intended to divide, fragment and further polarise society are being planned now and sadly supported by politicians from both sides of the Dewan Rakyat.

Never mind what Obama said about multiculturalism in Malaysia and the need to preserve the equal rights of minorities. His opinions echo the views of thinking individuals, both inside and outside the country, but they are still the views of a relative stranger.

Malaysians themselves, out of their own interests and vision of the country that they and their children want to live in, should defend multiculturalism in all sense of the word. They should speak out and electorally punish those who seek to polarise and particularise.

Old timers nostalgically reminisce about days long past when multiculturalism was the norm and, indeed, when it was an offence to try and dismantle.

Today, this has changed and if we let certain things slip over the coming months, we will find ourselves in an even more terrifying place.