

Moderation, Development's Essential Ingredient

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THE world has needed a movement of moderates ever since extremists of any stripe started organising on a mass scale. Unlike more localised or personal efforts at organisation, a movement offers better reach and heft.

Consequently, a movement is also more likely than isolated organisations to endure, assume greater visibility, grow and exert leverage for better impact. And there are few better ways for a movement to assert an international standing or universal appeal than to proclaim a global status.

At the very least, pockets of moderate-minded people who do not lack commitment and determination exist everywhere. They may even constitute the mainstream, among which those who do not share their inclinations form patchy, isolated segments.

But out of all the regions of the world that suffer the pangs of racial, religious, ideological, gender or some other form of chauvinistic extremism, which of them should establish a movement of moderates that is global in intent and scope? It is tempting to say anywhere which needs it most, but to originate such a movement for the world is something else again.

The local need for moderate tendencies and policies need not equate with having the best or most appropriate conditions for a global movement for that purpose. The birthplace for such a movement should have some element of extremism to know how to grapple with it, yet not be so overrun by extremists as to be obsessed or overwhelmed by them. South-east Asia is such a place.

This is largely a developing region that has seen grand old civilisations, from the Sri Vijaya empire to the Malacca Sultanate and the Lanna Kingdom, followed by Western colonisation and then self-determination and independence. The different levels of economic and political development among the countries of Southeast Asia today remain vivid.

Extremist tendencies occasionally arise within and between countries in this region. However, none has yet taken hold on a sufficiently major scale to damage any nation or society irreparably. Over the medium and long terms, Asean as an inclusive regional organisation has served to mitigate extremist tendencies and blunt their sharp points and edges.

Since countries in this region generally subscribe to fundamental liberties for their peoples, no state is embarking on an all-out effort to crush all elements deemed extremist. So long as they do not violate existing laws, they are free to hold their own views however noxious these may be. But where existing laws are deemed inadequate, legislation needs to be reinforced accordingly.

The challenge remains for each nation state to keep a handle on extremist groups and individuals, if only to make sure that they do not impinge on the rights and security of others, violate laws, or breach socially accepted norms of conduct. As ever, adequate laws are necessary and their diligent enforcement is vital.

Within Asean, Malaysia is as good a country as any to commence work on building a global movement of moderation against extremism. There have been and there remain elements of extremism at work in society. Like several countries in the regional neighbourhood, patches of extremism in Malaysia exist at the fringes, testing the limits of the mainstream that they hope to influence or displace.

For Malaysia as elsewhere, keeping a lid on extremism of all kinds is hard work. The task needs to be more than just routine law enforcement. It needs to include education, socialisation, enlightened policymaking and leadership by example. It is a full-time initiative that must constantly be bold, vigilant, perceptive, creative and innovative.

Desite occasional lurches to the contrary by certain individuals, avoiding extremism of any kind is in the “DNA” of the Malaysian nation. Ever since the idea of a Federation of Malaya emerging from previously disparate Malay sultanates materialised, every major racial and religious group domiciled in the Malay peninsula contributed actively to the work of state formation, the movement for independence and the process of nation building. This was enhanced from 1963 when the Federation of Malaysia was formed with Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore, adding more ethnic communities to the nation’s melting pot.

If Malaysia is unique, it is not only because it is multi-ethnic but because the major ethnic communities are sizeable. Their presence is reflected daily in the country’s wealth of local languages and dialects, mainstream and “new” media, and the vernacular and national school systems. From the beginning, the nation’s founding fathers were wise enough to embark on integrating the communities, which implies acceptance and respect for their cultures, rather than assimilation that compels them to conform to the norms of the dominant community.

Tunku Abdul Rahman, subsequently the first prime minister, led the movement for independence from the British and formalised the founding of what was then perhaps the world’s most celebrated multi-ethnic nation. But deadly rioting flared in 1969, wounding the national polity and setting back the work of communal

integration. Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak then had to pacify the country and renew international confidence in it, focusing on industrialisation. His immediate successor Tun Hussein Onn did further work on communal relations to consolidate national unity, while the next three prime ministers would temper economic growth with communal welfare.

In 1991, Malaysia launched a comprehensive 30-year development programme dubbed “Vision 2020.” Then Prime Minister Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad unveiled the ambitious plan to develop not just Malaysia but Malaysians. But while it remains celebrated at home and abroad, inspiring Asean’s own Vision 2020 programme, the visionary master plan’s original planks remain poorly understood.

The first time Malaysians or anyone else heard of the country’s Vision 2020 programme was Dr Mahathir’s speech at the Malaysian Business Council. Remarkably for the occasion, only the last two of Vision 2020’s nine objectives deal with economics. And of the two, only the last objective concerns economic prosperity.

The “ninth challenge” itself does not just concern prosperity as in economic growth, but contextualises it “with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.”

The eighth challenge is “of ensuring an economically just society... in which there is a fair and equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation, in which there is full partnership in economic progress.”

Clearly, growth for growth’s sake is too crude, vulgar and short-sighted for an enlightened programme like Vision 2020. The first seven objectives are even more fascinating: they remain just as seminal today more than two decades later, and may even be more vital because of some distractions along the way.

The seventh objective is to build “a fully caring society” in which the people’s welfare revolves around “a strong and resilient family,” not the state or the individual.

Where the “First World” of the developed West emphasises the individual as the basic societal unit and the “Second World” of the industrialised former socialist bloc stressed a paternalistic state, Malaysia’s concept of a caring society based on the family unit takes “Third World” development to creative and productive ends, with a sociable character and social responsibilities.

The sixth objective of “establishing a scientific and progressive society” positions Malaysia as both a consumer of, and a contributor to, global scientific and technological advancement.

At one level, this is to ensure that Malaysia and Malaysians reap the greatest possible benefit from the latest discoveries for their educational, employment, industrial, technical and other needs. At another level and no less importantly, becoming a scientific and progressive nation also means discarding the narrow, outdated and harmful irrationalities of the past to embrace the light of an enabling modernity.

The fifth objective of building “a mature, liberal and tolerant society” where all Malaysians are free to practice their traditions and profess their beliefs is something that many countries including Malaysia aspire to.

Will Malaysia succeed in becoming such a society, and do so by 2020? One way to ensure progress is to guard against backsliding into the morass of disabling extremism and bigotry. This challenge is formidable enough for any country, the more so for multi-ethnic Malaysia.

The fourth challenge of building “a fully moral and ethical society” refers to the basic character of the nation. This goal must surely be a universal ideal that is neither far-fetched nor impracticable.

There can be no room for cynical defeatism that dismisses any prospect of evolving towards a moral and ethical society. Just as these values are consistent with every religious and philosophical tradition in Malaysia, the means for realising them in education, legislation, enforcement and political leadership are at the disposal of Malaysians.

The third objective of “developing a mature democratic society” sees the national polity “practising a form of mature, consensual, community-oriented Malaysian democracy” that can be a model for other developing nations.

There is no question that Malaysia has made headway in democratisation in recent years. But in order to be credible such reforms have to be consistent, besides progressing beyond election campaign promises and “sweeteners” to actually embody good governance.

The second objective is to build “a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian Society” that is confident, conscientious and resilient.

Once again this relates to the innate character of Malaysians. It is not beyond the scope of the Malaysian character to reach such levels of sophistication in social development, but it will take much effort, patience and social planning with the requisite political will.

The first objective of Vision 2020, which to its author Dr Mahathir is likely to be “the most fundamental, the most basic,” is “establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny.”

Malaysians would then comprise one “Bangsa Malaysia” (Malaysian Race) loyal and dedicated to their shared nation, a country “at peace with itself territorially, and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership.”

This remains an important work in progress. The challenge has been acknowledged as a natural prerequisite of the other eight objectives of the Vision 2020 master plan. A fully integrated and united Malaysia enables all other plans to be realised, and without which little of value for the nation can be actualised.

The current expression of “Bangsa Malaysia” is “One Malaysia” (“1Malaysia”), which lends a more comprehensible and agreeable meaning for many upon translation. At its best, the brainchild of incumbent Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is about a deep-seated sense of nationhood within each citizen that goes beyond slogans and cheerleading. It is an integral part of the soul of the Malaysian nation, and a core need of Malaysia at this point in its history.

The nine objectives have been characterised as challenges: both as benchmarks and as goals to be achieved in themselves. Together they form the distance markers on a road map for the comprehensive development of Malaysia. They also demonstrate certain abiding realities about the Malaysian condition.

Firstly, Malaysia’s larger development needs in the 21st century are no longer material or economic. After posting several decades of relatively high growth, national needs are now more values-laden and values-based. It is not that economic growth is no longer important, rather that all priorities including continued growth have become dependent on the social health of the nation and its component communities.

Secondly, all the nine challenges of Vision 2020 are related. They are functionally indivisible: the achievement of one facilitates the achievement of the others, while the negation of any tends to negate the rest. Just as development means more than material gain, comprehensive development for modern Malaysia includes developing the various capacities of Malaysians to live more fulfilling lives and to contribute better to society.

Thirdly, all of the nine challenges may be met only in a society with a moderate mindset. From political maturity to inter-communal sensitivity to having an economy that is internally just and externally competitive, the challenges of Vision 2020 drive the country to avoid extremist tendencies in all forms. Not insignificantly, to achieve national development in its later stages Malaysia needs to nurture its character of reason and moderation.

In centuries past, traders and other seafarers from abroad visited and settled in the bustling Malay states of the time. Others had come to find work or seek a

better livelihood for their families. Together the denizens of these states built the singular nation that is Malaysia today.

The character of the Malaysian nation is not determined at only key points of its history. It is constantly defined and modified by the continual dialogue, negotiation and other interaction of the country's various institutions, agencies, communities and individual citizens themselves. How things turn out cannot be predetermined, since much depends on the people and their elected representatives.

Malaysia has not only discovered that its roots as a nation lie in moderation and that its development trajectory had subsumed moderate policies and actions. It has also found that its future as a cohesive and thriving nation depends on avoiding all forms of extremism. And if such is true for Malaysia, that much may also be true for other countries.

There may come a time when the Malaysian story will inspire other developing countries to undertake a similar journey. Which aspects of Malaysia's achievements they choose to emulate, if any, is for them to decide. Malaysians need to focus on building their nation with commitment, integrity and an essential sense of proportion, propriety and what is deemed appropriate. This innate sense of the considered is often regarded as moderation in the affairs of state and of society.

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