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In pursuit of happiness...

BEYOND 2020: Basic needs, self-esteem and freedom to choose — these are the core values towards understanding the meaning of a developed Malaysia

IN February, the prime minister of the United Arab Emirates announced the creation of a minister of state for happiness as part of a major government shake-up.

Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Al Maktoum, who is also the ruler of Dubai, said the minister will “align and drive government policy to create social good and satisfaction”. The aim is to change the criteria used to measure governmental success from economic indicators to measures related to human happiness and well-being.

Clearly, happiness is part of the human wellbeing, and greater happiness may, in itself, expand an individual’s capability to function.

As Amartya Sen argued, “Utility in the sense of happiness may well be included in the list of some important functioning, relevant to a person’s wellbeing”.

For Sen, human “wellbeing” means being well, in the basic sense of being healthy, well-nourished, well-clothed, literate and long-lived, and

more broadly, being able to take part in the life of the community, being mobile and having the freedom of choice in what one can become and can do.

Aside from not being poor, people are often happier when they are not unemployed, not divorced or separated, and have a high trust of others in society, as well as when they have access to democratic freedom and have religious faith.

Perhaps we need to define or broadly conceptualise what we mean when we talk about the state of happiness as the sustained elevation of an entire society and social system towards a “better” or “more humane” life.

What constitutes a happy and good life is a question as old as philosophy, one that must be periodically re-evaluated and answered afresh in the changing global environment. Most importantly, the Malaysian society almost demands such a re-evaluation.

Undoubtedly, a person born in Malaysia has many advantages compared with those born in, say, the Middle East, Latin America or some of its neighbouring countries.

But, during the last two or so decades we have seen a disturbing gap emerge. We have become unhappier of late, according to the 2015 United Nations-backed World Happiness Report. The country dropped 10 places from 2012 to rank 61st place.

A sense of prejudice and racism among ethnic minorities is still strong

among people, which may impede us from achieving Vision 2020. While we are three years only away from 2020, how close is Malaysia to reaching the goal?

The transformation towards a developed nation is not solely based on economic and technological progress. It also needs progress in family relationships, financial situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom, values and, above all, to achieve national integration as well as social, cultural, intellectual and spiritual development.

We need to look beyond 2020 and start a discourse to formulate a new vision, programmes and activities for nation-building. However, the main question remains unanswered — how are we preparing the nation beyond 2020?

The appropriate answer for today is not necessarily the same as it would have been in previous decades when the vision was launched. Nonetheless, at least three basic components or core values serve as a conceptual basis and practical guideline for answering and understanding the inner meaning of Malaysia as a developed nation by 2020. These core values are:

THE ability to meet basic needs. All people have certain basic needs without which life would be impossible. These life-sustaining basic human needs include food, shelter, health and protection. Without sustained and continuous economic progress at the individual as well as societal level, the realisation of the human potential would not be possible. Rising per capita incomes, the elimination of

absolute poverty, greater employment opportunities and reducing income inequalities, therefore, constitute the necessary but not the sufficient conditions for development;

SELF-ESTEEM: To be a person, a second component of the happy life, is self-esteem — a sense of worth and self-respect, of not being used as a tool by others for their own ends. All of us in society seek some basic form of self-esteem, although one may refer to as identity, dignity, respect and recognition; and,

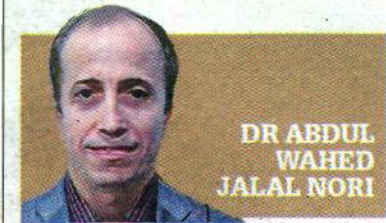
A THIRD value which is quite related to the second is to be able to choose (the concept of human freedom). For any one of us, what matters most to our happiness is the quality of government in its widest sense, and the extent to which people can govern their own actions. People blessed with freedom, peace, order, equity and rights, and government by benign rulers.

We may conclude that the state of happiness is both a physical reality and a state of mind in which people have, through a combination of social, economic and institutional processes, to secure the means for obtaining a happy and better life.

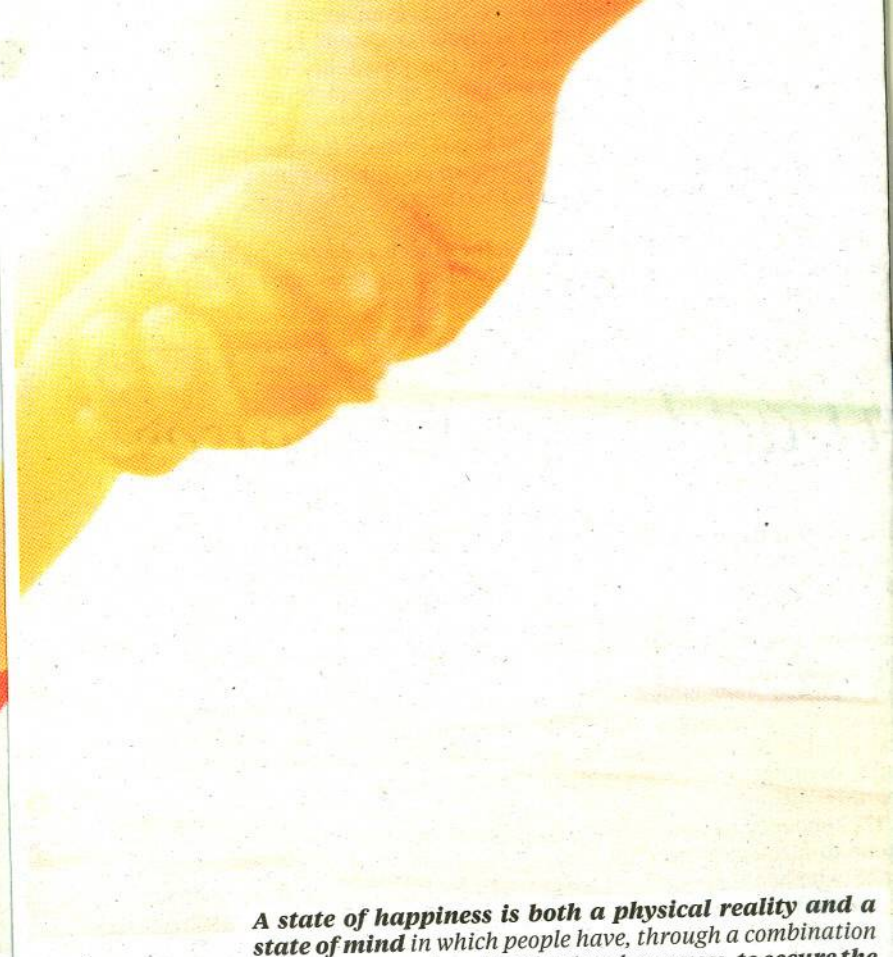
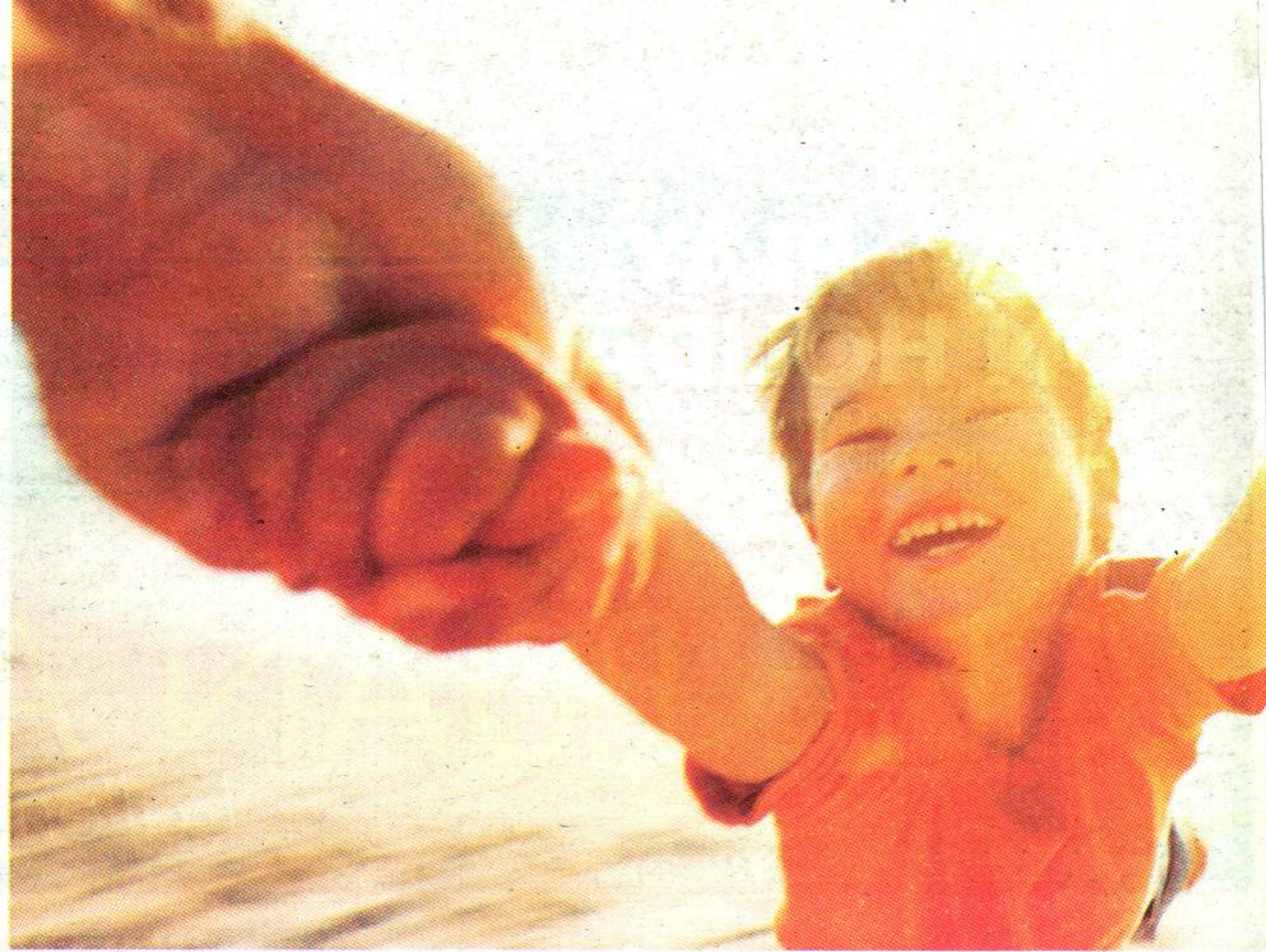
Therefore, it is the right time to start driving government policy to create social good and satisfaction. Happiness in Malaysia is not just a hope; there must be concrete, yet effective plans, projects and programmes, and reasonable indicators.

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