

COMMENT

Weaving strong ties

PROGRESSIVE MODEL: Malaysians must build a society based on commonality rather than differences

PERHAPS it is the right time to analyse and discuss the nature of the current interethnic relations in Malaysia and why they appear to have deteriorated, thus adversely affecting the agenda of national integration.

Are we really concerned about what's going on in our society? Do we consciously think about the kind of society we would like to be in the future? Why is compromise on major issues so hard when no one doubts that it is necessary for the survival of the nation? Perhaps it is the right time to ask where we have been as a society and where do we want to go.

Riane Eisler, author of the international bestseller, *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987), introduced a conceptual framework for studying social systems that pays particular attention to how a society constructs roles and relations. She proposes that underlying the long span of human cultural evolution is the tension between what Eisler calls the dominator or domination model and the partnership model. The dominator model is characterised by relations of control, domination, manipulation and competition, and the partnership model is characterised by equity, caring, sustainability, non-



Schoolchildren celebrating National Day in Kuching. To emphasise commonality implies a quest for tolerance, coexistence and an overcoming of cultural differences.

violence and justice.

Essentially, we can view each other through two different lenses: commonality or difference. To emphasise commonality implies a quest for tolerance, coexistence and understanding, an overcoming of cultural differences and, above all, attaching major value to the very act of coexistence and partnership model.

The result would be a society committed to cultural, ethnic and racial pluralism — a commitment in which individuals of different cultural, ethnic and racial communities interact in a dynamic and collaborative way while maintaining and valuing their differences.

Such an interaction will produce an environment in which different perspectives are equally valued and utilised in the decision-making process. To stress commonality requires some degree of social and

communal security and confidence in which one does not feel threatened by "the other".

However, an emphasis on differences — valuing differences and treating separateness as a high value, having a tendency to exclude groups that are different from us, marginalising and discriminating against them — could ultimately breed conflict and violence.

Profound differences in psychology and sociology lie behind our choice. The psychology that emphasises difference over commonality rests on insecurity of social identity and on the vulnerability of the community; it stimulates focus upon difference — to identify, emphasise and protect what is uniquely mine that is threatened by what is yours.

Communities under stress will adopt a conservative strategy that stresses the fundamentals — the

hardcore traditions and uncompromising message designed to protect oneself and one's culture from external power.

These conditions largely characterise our society today, pushing one towards the embrace of the most uncompromising and purest form of self-expression. This is a key explanation for the rise of narrower and more intolerant views of religion today, one that weakens the position of those who are interested in modernising, broadening and liberalising interpretations and understanding of religion.

Unfortunately, in Malaysia, race and religion has become so deeply entrenched in our system and in everything that we do. We have all begun to think and look at things from the prism of race and religion. In fact, the very vocabulary to dis-

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Integrated progressive policy boosts partnership, mutual respect

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cuss religion and faith is fraught with sensitivities. Each basic term — religion, faith, spiritual, secular and pluralism — carries associated controversies.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with becoming religious, and upholding religious values and prin-

ciples. The mistake is when we use religion for domination and cause discomfort to people of other faiths.

Our way of dealing with interreligious issues needs urgent reform. An integrated progressive policy agenda is needed — one based on partnership, mutual respect and caring rather than domination, top-down control and coercion. As oft

said, “Politics is the art of compromise”, which means, “It’s not about what’s right or what’s best. It’s about what you can actually get done”.

Politics is about negotiating consensus and cooperation between factions. Getting everything you want is impossible, and often, you have to severely compromise to get anything you want at all. But, re-

fusing to compromise means that you get nothing whatsoever.

It is up to us (the government, leaders and people) to rise to the occasion. Good governance is vital — a fair and just leadership for the country rather than leadership for a particular race or religion.

We need a new way of thinking to pave the way for a future where all

citizens have the opportunity to realise their potentials for consciousness, compassion, caring and creativity — the capacities that makes one fully human.

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