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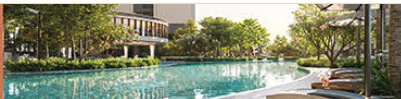
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my Say: Malaysia at 60: Don't stop believing in her potential

By Tengku Zafrul Abdul Aziz / The Edge Malaysia

18 Sep 2023, 12:40 pm

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This Malaysia Day, I want to share five pieces of “food for thought” with my fellow Malaysians as we negotiate the challenges ahead.

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Diversity is a strength

First, apart from our strategic position and our natural resources, our people and their multiracial, multi-faith character also contribute to our strength as a nation.

Dozens of ethnic groups and religions have lived together on our shores for centuries. This should be something we cherish — but we could lose it all very quickly if we don’t nip the growing

polarisation in the bud. Indeed, we still have a long way to go to make our country a home for all its people.

But here’s the hard truth: the world today is locked in a fierce competition for talent. That, more than mineral or financial or military heft, is what will ultimately determine whether nations — including our own — will rise or fall.

But if we give in to our primordial fears, or the temptation to pander to one group, we will deprive ourselves of the combined strength, wisdom and drive of all our people. That would be a disservice to our current and future generations, regardless of race.

Rather, Malaysia must be governed together by all its people. Everyone must feel like they have a stake in its destiny and contribute to it.

Walking the talk on inclusiveness

Second, our multiracial feature must be celebrated. Our country’s plans and policies must become more inclusive. Aid programmes must shift gradually to needs-based regimes.

All Malaysians who are in need, whether they are in Teluk Intan or Tenom, deserve to be helped. And all Malaysians deserve equality of opportunities.

If we refuse to accept this, it will be like fielding a football team where four of the 11 players have their legs broken — a recipe for disaster!

Moderation must be defended

This does not mean that we are giving up on the bumiputera empowerment agenda. But rather, we must recognise that intra-ethnic equality is now a challenge just as much as inter-ethnic.

Ultimately, ensuring bumiputeras can succeed on their own should be the goal; rather than the defence of affirmative action at all costs; ignoring how much the world and its economy have changed.

And we must preserve diversity within our own ethnic group. Apart from what is provided for in the Federal Constitution, no one has a monopoly on defining what it is to be a Malay.

We are made up of a wide variety of backgrounds and world views. This has been possible because, despite our diverse origins, Malays are generally moderates at heart. Moderation is the core of the sociocultural psyche and indeed, the Muslim faith.

I believe moderation is what most Malaysians share, and this must not be lost due to

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Third: unity matters to the economy. Investors, in this era of geopolitical fragmentation, treasure stability. Investments, both foreign and domestic, will only flow to countries that are peaceful and politically stable.

Trying to turn Malaysia into a monocultural nation may scare away investors. We must realise that our multiracialism contributes to, rather than exists independently of our economic success.

Greater understanding needed

Fourth: we need more understanding between both parts of our country: the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak.

Sixty years is a long time to be together, but we could get to know each other better, especially those in the peninsula regarding East Malaysia. It is ironic how we sometimes feel more “Malaysian” when we are abroad but automatically revert to our racial groups back home.

The unity government is working to also address this issue. For instance, in the New Industrial Master Plan (NIMP) 2030, one of the action plans of Mission 4 (which is to safeguard economic security and inclusivity) calls for a better distribution of industrial development between all states, regardless of the state government’s political affiliation.

This includes strengthening downstreaming and renewable energy in Sabah, as well as helping to position Sarawak as a hydrogen economy leader and coordinating with Perlis to develop agriculture (food processing), biotechnology, RE and mining.

Just as we must recognise the challenge of intra-ethnic inequality, so too must we be cognisant of economic inequality between states.

Let’s be constructive

Finally, Malaysians must become more constructive. The last couple of years have demoralised many, no thanks to unifying politics.

However, if we are to thrive, Malaysians must be more invested in regaining our sense of national self, and pride in our nationhood.

No government or its plans will succeed if great swathes of our public are locked in cynicism or fear of the other.

There have been times when needed reforms were sabotaged simply because there was an unwillingness to give and take, or to commit to short-term pain for long-term gain.

We must have faith in ourselves

There is a need to focus on the future and on Malaysia’s strengths.

We must not be bogged down in a sense of pessimism and nagging negativity. We must believe that there is nothing wrong with Malaysia that cannot be cured with what is right about the country.

Our destiny is as a multicultural nation, at peace with itself, proud of its identities but also open to the world. We already have what it takes for a successful Malaysia, but what is needed now is faith — in ourselves.

Investment inflow for the first quarter of 2023 was up almost 60% year on year. If investors, both foreign and domestic, have faith in our country, why can’t we?

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So, my concluding message to all Malaysians: keep the faith in our motherland that offers so much potential. Happy 60th Birthday Malaysia — and here's to many more!

Tengku Zafrul Aziz is minister of investment, trade and industry

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