



By Dr Farish Noor

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AUG 12 — A Malaysian ambassador once asked me if, after living and working abroad for more

than 2½ decades, I still kept my Malaysian citizenship. And I answered yes. He was surprised somewhat and added: “Thank God, at least we haven’t lost you as well.” I replied: “Well, we have lost so many good academics and professionals by now I’m not sure if that makes any difference by this stage...”

Yet out of some naïveté on my part I would still state that I believe in the Malaysian project, for all its quirks and shortcomings. And now, as Malaysia looks ahead at a decade that will undoubtedly transform the face of Southeast Asia and will witness the gradual decline of American influence and the rise of China’s in Asean, we hold fast to the ship of state that is due for a severe battering as never before.

While the inflow and outflow of foreign capital investment FDI in and out of Asean will radically re-draw the political boundaries of the region and lead to the rise of new growth centres and the decline of old ones, our national politics is dominated by horror stories, amok stories, bomoh stories and of course the motley crew of communitarian heroes and ethnic champions who care only about their own respective ethno-religious communities.

Every ethno-racial demagogue talks about having to champion the cause of “his people”; regardless of the fact that “his people” may not have appointed him to that task. Oppositional dialectics rules the roost as identities are configured in exclusive oppositional terms time and again: us against them, in-group versus out-group. This has been the mottled landscape of our national consciousness since independence, and we still cannot get out of this narrow and blinkered mode of thinking.

During my long sojourn abroad, I constantly met Malaysians who could discard and/or transcend their limited ethnic confines while overseas, for there they are Malaysians. Yet it seems as if a spell has been cast upon all of us, for as soon as we step back into Malaysia the first question that comes to our lips is: What race are you?

As someone who has researched across South and Southeast Asia for more than 12 years, I am struck by this peculiar habit of ours: in India and Indonesia — two countries I love as much as Malaysia — no one has ever asked me that question. And indeed, in both countries I often pass as a local and the case is closed. Few attempts, if ever, are made to locate me in the ethnic landscape of the country. Nobody asks what race I am, which religion I belong to, etc. Why?

I refuse to believe that Malaysians are condemned by history or genetics to remain in the rut that we have built for ourselves. There is nothing biologically unique about us as to condemn us to such narrow solipsism for eternity. And if we Malaysians can transcend narrow ethnic and religious compartmentalisation abroad, why can't we do it at home?

Which brings me to the subject of home, and homeliness. "Home" is where we are meant to be happy and content; safe and assured; comfortable and at ease with ourselves. Home is where we need not wear our identities on our sleeves, or as armour to protect ourselves from whatever hostile influences there may be without. And if Malaysia is home to us, then it ought to be the one place on this God's earth where we can be ourselves without having to apologise for it.

Yet the divisive nature of our communitarian politics has robbed us all of this sense of comfort and homeliness, for it seems that comfort can no longer be shared among all Malaysians, our fellow citizens. The comfort zones of each community has become something sacrosanct, thanks to the politicking of the various parties and politicians of the country, who continue to harp on the need to first protect, and then to expand, the respective comfort zones of their exclusive communities.

As a result, the boundaries of these different comfort zones are bound to clash, and the result is the antagonism we see everywhere in the media today: Harassment of intellectuals and non-partisan articulators; scare-mongering campaigns about how the “Other” is about to undermine “Us”; rumours of plots and stratagems used by “Them” against “Us”, etc. Where, pray tell, is the national body then in the midst of this mutual apprehension and distrust? How can a nation be built when its components do not think as a nation in the first place?

I write this only as an academic who constantly reminds his students that national identities are constructs that have to be sustained in the imaginary of individual subjects. As I have said countless times before, the trees and hills, rivers and valleys, roads and malls we see around us are not Malaysian: They have no consciousness and no awareness of what they are or even where they are. “Malaysia” is a construct that exists in us, Malaysians — and it is we, Malaysians, who bear the identity of the nation over time.

WE are Malaysia, and WE are the nation. But that can only come true if we genuinely think of ourselves as Malaysians and we are prepared to step beyond our comfort zones in order to recognise, defend and uphold the common citizenship we share with each and every other Malaysian citizen around us. Every Malaysian is a brother or sister to his/her fellow Malaysian; and as such the qualms we have about the poverty and injustice we see meted to our fellow citizens is a concern to all of us. We cannot continue to racialise poverty as if it was an ethnic concern of one group only; any more than ownership of the nation can be claimed by one segment of the populace.

I do not think I will live to see the day when this sense of collective, common and equal nationhood will ever be internalised and normalised in the country, frankly. So to go back to the ambassador's question as to why I never gave up my citizenship; I can only put it down to a naive, childish faith that may well be blind as well. (I am only thankful that I do not have any children and am unlikely to have any at my age now, for I genuinely fear for the future and where the future may take them.)

But faith, however feeble and irrational, is still required to give birth to nations that are born out of the collective aspirations of many. I do not know how much longer I can keep up my work, or doing what I do — for time seems to be running out for me and the end of the road is nowhere in sight. But as the storm clouds gather as the geopolitical winds build up across our region; and as talk of clashes between the great and emerging powers grow louder by the day, I fear not for myself but rather for Malaysia as a whole.

Our politicians seem to have an attention span that lasts only up to the next by-election or general election; our public figures play the racial or religious card whenever it suits them. Our nation is sorely in need of a reminder that we are all on the same boat, and whether it sinks or swims, it will carry all of us whether we like it or not.

For the first time in my life, I feel genuine fear for the future — made all the worse by the apparent absence of political wisdom and leadership of any meaningful kind. And in the face of fear, all I can hold on to is faith; faith in the Malaysian project.

*** Dr Farish A. Noor is a Senior Fellow at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.**