

'Gulag' mentality that is holding us back

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Comment

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THE declaration of Sept 16 as a national holiday -- which happened quite close to the eve of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall on Nov 9, 1989 -- has special significance to Malaysians all over the country.

Although unlike the neighbouring cities of East and West Berlin, divided by a man-made barrier, Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak are on two land masses separated naturally by a deep blue ocean. While their German counterparts, Berliners in particular, faced unimaginable tragedies for almost three decades, Malaysians on either sides are spared such agonies.

Unlike the physical reunification of Berlin where the two cities could literally be united, this is not possible for the two parts that make up Malaysia (unless one can imagine a massive land bridge between the two regions). But that is precisely why the symbolic declaration of Malaysia Day as national holiday is so important. It cements, once and for all, the two separated parts of the country, although it has taken more than four decades to realise this.

While this has no semblance to the triumph over the Cold War, it has everything to do with the success of the 1Malaysia concept.

Ours is more about tearing down the "mental wall" that has arisen due to unfamiliarity because of physical distance and could lead to suspicion and mistrust. We were distant not only physically but socio-economically and culturally. We have been unable to bridge that distance despite many attempts, albeit at times, superficial. The analogy of East and West Berlin may be too extreme, but it is undeniable that gaps exist between our peninsular and Bornean states, especially for those in the rural areas who are almost cut off from development.

It is not unusual for us to read, for example, of primary pupils having to walk before sunrise to schools some distance away from their homes. Or that common and basic utilities are still found wanting in some areas.



These pupils in Sarawak may not be able to afford school shoes but they still deserve the best from their teachers and other Malaysians.

Yet, as noted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak himself, Sabah and Sarawak are living examples of tolerant and diverse communities of many ethnicities that have managed to stay intact, if not thrive, despite the racialised politics of their peninsular counterparts.

At the very least, the declaration of Sept 16 as a national holiday recognises these unique inter-communal experiences and helps realise them beyond just the Bornean states.

Just like the more fortunate Germans extending their hands to help and accommodate their new-found fellow

citizens, Malaysians should also be have similar gestures as a translation of the prime minister's statement that it is only fair for the people of Sabah and Sarawak "to enjoy progress, education, economic and social development as in Semenanjung".

For too long, Sabah and Sarawak have been treated by some as a gulag of sorts, where the worst of characters, be they teachers, civil servants or professionals, are sent into exile to a faraway place, virtually out of sight and, therefore, out of mind. This is most irresponsible, because it only means the gaps will widen even more in those areas, worsening the situation as the community continues to suffer. Project that on a national scale and everyone loses in the end.

I recall an incident where a teacher wanted to buy a pair of shoes for a poor pupil. Without thinking, the salesperson offered low-quality shoes, assuming that was all the pupil could afford. But the wise teacher interjected, emphasising that it was the poor who needed the best quality shoes, so that they would last a longer time.

In other words, the marginalised and the neglected must be given the very best to make up for what they lack through no fault of their own, if the playing field is to be levelled. Contrary to what has been practised conventionally thus far, the "gulag" mentality must go, not only for the deprived areas of Sabah and Sarawak but all over the country.

By the same token, Malaysians must regard it as an honour to serve these places in earnest, for at least the period they are assigned. They should in no way regard it as hard labour or a punishment, especially when they are high achievers and performers. We must always keep in mind the wisdom displayed by the teacher when buying shoes for the poor pupil.

The teacher could have been a health professional, a lawyer, an administrator or even a politician -- no matter who they are, they must put their best foot forward and make a lasting difference in unison for the future of this country.

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