

MY SAY: To dialogue or not to dialogue?

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Article

The Edge - 08/25/2008

A dialogue is commonly understood to involve more than one party engaging with each other, especially to exchange ideas and come to an understanding and agreement on certain issues. That would include an agreement to disagree in a civil way. The more intense the issue, the more relevant the need for a dialogue. Indeed many conflicting parties usually resolve their differences through a dialogue. The prerequisite? There must be sincerity, trust and respect for mutual benefits and interest — more so when it involves a good majority of the community.

Since Independence, the ruling government has used this mechanism to successfully form a pre-coalition of political parties with diverse interests. While most would form a post-election coalition, the pre-coalition is classic when it comes to forging dialogues. While the former can fail, the latter does not have that luxury, lest it risks not being able to be the ruling government, in general.

Surprisingly though, of late, not everyone thinks dialogue is a good thing. When two political parties of different ideologies wanted to iron out longstanding issues in relation to their future commitments, many seemed against it. Some were quite adamant about not having one and were seemingly more sceptical and suspicious, perhaps because they were somehow affected. Others opposed it outright for reasons best known to themselves. For sure, the option to not dialogue is an option to remain divisive and exclusive. In other words, the possibility of a unified stand has been ruled out prematurely.

Ironically, some of those who opposed the said dialogue had already carved out an understanding among themselves, presumably following a dialogue of sorts, before taking a common position. Where one draws the line is, of course, difficult to say, without taking into consideration such elements as power, popularity and some sort of gain to be made politically or otherwise. At times, it is purely about showmanship and one-upmanship.

In a complex society like Malaysia's, dialogues aimed at building consensus cannot be over-emphasised in an attempt to forge a strong and cohesive society based on genuine understanding among the diverse population. Polarisation, which has often been cited as the curse of a multiethnic society, is nothing but a manifestation of a lack of genuine dialogue that could lead to better and deeper interaction.

Here, we are faced with a schizophrenic mode of thinking. We lack common tools for consensus-building, foremost among which is the language and vocabulary, compounded by the lack of a cohesive system of education, where dialogue across the communities could be encouraged as a pillar of learning. In essence, we lack the routine platform where we can build "trust" over generations for a meaningful outcome that would ensure positive and lasting relationships.

After all, to enter into a dialogue is to recognise that there are already some forms of "inequality" or "imbalance" — perceived or otherwise — that need to be ironed out. The purpose is not to doubt the noble thought, provided the idea is properly instituted, drawing the best from all parties concerned towards reconciliation. And this can only be for the benefit of all concerned and the nation.

Unfortunately, of late, we have seen more hype in challenging one another to a "debate" — a form of dialogue more akin to a "win-lose" proposition, rather than coming closer to a "win-win" situation, if not reconciliation and consensus. This is especially so when the debate is conducted publicly, televised parliamentary debates included, where the pressure of one-upmanship is hard to resist. Given the low prevailing level of "trust" among those involved, it could be a perfect recipe for failure, creating disunity.

Thus, as we look forward to celebrate our 51st Merdeka day, we must encourage even more dialogues before the meaning of "bersekutu bertambah mutu" (unity is strength) — the motto of the armorial ensign of Malaysia — can be fully realised. And this calls for renewed trust and sincerity on the part of every Malaysian.

[Terms & Conditions](#)