

Malaysia a case study in unity

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Article

The New Sunday Times - 07/08/2007

THE prime minister, during his visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina recently, made an impact when he suggested that they copy Malaysia in nation building. He said Malaysia could serve as a template for multi-ethnic, Muslim-majority Bosnia-Herzegovina.

This came during his lecture at the University of Sarajevo where he was presented with the Golden Pin — the highest award by the university.

The two countries share many similarities and thus can learn from one another.

What seems clear is that the Malaysian formula of managing a complex pluralistic society is working, although admittedly there is a need to continue refining it. After all, time changes and so the need to adapt and adjust. The road to a better society is always under construction.

There are not too many relatively successful examples that other nations can look up to in the search for lasting communal harmony. Some of the existing melting pots are in fact undergoing a meltdown.

Thus, to constantly share invaluable experiences of what works is vital as more and more societies are faced with the challenges to globalise.

And this need becomes even greater as globalisation is fast presenting itself as an asymmetrical force, posturing towards integration but in reality espousing the qualities of assimilation with all its biases.

While the language of integration promotes diversity and coexistence of minority cultures with the majority, globalisation (through its power of assimilation) absorbs minority cultures into the majority.

There are subtle and not-so-subtle expressions, often directed at other non-dominant ethnic manifestations considered "foreign" (if not a threat) to their existing values and norms. They include dressing styles such as headscarves and navel-bearing hipsters. These are just the tip of the iceberg. It does not matter if these are practices of their own citizens, albeit of a different religio-ethnic descent. The outcome is often devastating.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, which for many centuries was an excellent example of people of many nationalities and religions co-existing with one another, has fallen victim to tragedy.

Although today it is resilient enough to tolerate similar diversity once more, the fracture is rather obvious, if fragile. Today, they are two entities — the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Croats and Muslims. Both are very much aware of many painful and bloody tragedies in the not too distant past.

As late as 1992 until 1995, they were torn apart by the fighting and killing that still haunt them today.

The examples of inhumane impact of aggression can be seen as one travels in and around the captivating capital city, Sarajevo.

Mass graves are reminders of an unequal war. Each is marked by rows of tombstones neatly painted in white. They have become a feature in what would otherwise be a picturesque landscape.

It was only after many massacres that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) saw fit to begin airstrikes against the perpetrators (Bosnian Serbs) on Aug 28, 1995.

The Serbs were then led by Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian communist party chief, one of the many notorious war criminals.

He was driven by an ostensible historical dream to enlarge Serbian domination.

Bosnia Herzegovina declared independence and gained recognition from the European Community and the United States. But not before the Bosnian Serbs began their stranglehold on Sarajevo and set the stage for a protracted and barbaric siege.

Stories of untold sorrow, despair and anguish among the living have been well-documented.

Of the many, there is one story, little known outside Bosnia. It is about a young Bosnian Serb woman who was forced to leave Sarajevo with her family and her Muslim boyfriend.

As she missed him so much, she decided to return to the city, bringing with her a bag containing food and gifts, and an automatic rifle.

They were both found dead later near a bridge which she had crossed to join her beloved.

Called the Bridge of Brotherhood and Unity, currently under the control of Unprofor (the UN peacekeeping force), it is now better known as the Bridge of Romeo and Juliet.

Aptly, it symbolises the undying love and sacrifice that humans are capable of, regardless of their differences.

It is this bridge that the world needs to build very badly if similar bitter lessons of aggression are not to be repeated, ever. But for now, it is a bridge too far.

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