

We're one big family

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Article

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TEN years after the Asian economic crisis, an independent panel of "eminent persons" for the Manila-based Asian Development Bank (ADB) in a recent report noted that by 2020, 90 per cent of Asians will live in middle-income countries.

The region will account for nearly 45 per cent of global domestic product and 35 per cent of the world trade (WSJ, May 4-6).

The panel, however, was quick to point out: "This broadly favourable outlook is plausible if there are no unexpected major crisis in the world economy or political upheavals in the region."

In the same breath, in a speech earlier this year, the ADB president observed: "The gap between rich and poor—both across the countries and within each country—is growing."



In short, should such a gap be left unattended, or worse still widens, there is little likelihood the outlook will remain favourable for too long.

For Malaysia, there is no better testimony to this than what happened in 1969 during the May 13 tragedy. Exactly 38 years ago today, Malaysia experienced one of its bloodiest political turmoils which could be traced back to that gap between the rich and the Poor.

Unfortunately, it mirrors an ethnic fault-line and remains coloured as such till this day.

As a teenager who witnessed the traumatic episode, it left a lasting impression. It shaped my outlook about what this country and its future is all about.

Though it is largely said to be an issue about economic disparity, deep down it seems to be more about people; more so their affinity for power, wealth, greed and indifference to the needs of others.

Still, these are the people whom you know and you live with in a very diverse and complex society. The question for me then is:

"How do we remain one as a nation, if power, wealth, greed and indifference are the divisive elements in our society?"

The hint for an answer to this seemingly mind-boggling question came on day two of the tragedy.

Most had the tendency to create further hatred and animosity among the innocent. My family was unfortunate to be caught in the web of one such rumour.

It began with Raman, the owner of the nearby sundry shop, who whispered to my father the rumour that his family and surrounding Indian community were under threat.

He needed some advice as what was the best option for his family and the immediate community.

Raman, who had lived in our neighbourhood for as long as I can remember, was not a stranger to our family. His two sons, Raju and Perumal, were my playmates.

We shared many good times together, at times had our meals in each other's houses. Raman, who also operated a taxi service, gave a helping hand anytime we needed transportation.

The fact that my father was a teacher earned the highest respect from Raman and his family. That he could speak a splintering of Tamil made the relationship even more meaningful.

My father's response to Raman's anxiety was rather spontaneous.

"*Tinggallah di rumah saya malam ini. Raman dan keluarga!*"

It was the kind of open invitation that makes perfect sense in normal times. Only that at the time there was supposed to be some form of ethnic conflict raging, at least in the heart of Kuala Lumpur! So to offer an Indian, let alone his family, into a Malay house for protection defied rational logic.

The plan was for Raman and his family to sneak in just as the sun set and remain there till the break of dawn.

Although we knew Raman had an extended family, we did not expect an "entourage" of about 25 people that time. I could remember this well enough because our house was small. The strict orders were no chatting or anything that could arouse suspicion.

I had a ruler in my hand, ready to spring to action anytime someone went out of line. After all, it could be a matter of life and death for us. God willing, the night was peaceful. Just before dawn, Raman and his "entourage" sneaked out without any untoward incident.

I asked my father why he did what he did. Taking a risk that could have cost our family a great deal, to say the least. Again, his answer was spontaneous: "*Raman itu keluarga.*" And went on to remind me what that means. It is about the family of people, period.

That was one of the most valuable lessons that I learned from May 13. It changed my worldview about things around me.

Interestingly, it was a lesson learned not in school per se but in the community in which we lived in as a family.

To quote the 13th *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* on the occasion of his installation recently: "I admit it's not easy for a multiracial population to live in peace and harmony. Look around us. Not too many are successful; more have failed.

"We must maintain this precious unity to the best we can. Co-existing requires us to understand, respect and be tolerant of each Other."

That understanding, respect and tolerance of each other can only be nurtured if we begin to live together as *keluarga*.

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