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Insight - Let's set our differences aside

PRESS CITATIONS | 04 AUGUST 2021



OFT-TIMES, in the face of adversity and crisis, the most Malaysian thing to do is put our differences aside and work together to overcome them. This is most apparent during natural disasters, or monsoon floods.

Other examples include past financial crises, as well as the severe acute respiratory syndrome and Japanese encephalitis health crises, to name a few.

Our beloved country is still in a health and economic crisis. Many countries, including Malaysia, who had successfully contained the virus before are currently seeing a spike in cases due to the Delta and Lambda variants, which are more lethal and infectious than earlier versions. Yes, there may be much reason for many of us to be angry and play the blame game. But, the omnipresent threat of the virus ill affords us such luxury.

It is exactly this threat that underscores the urgency of the National Recovery Plan (NRP), which is based on six core principles, including reopening our economy; being guided by science and data; taking a whole-of-nation approach; and ensuring the plan is dynamic and adaptable.

At the heart of this core, however, is a sincere and serious effort cutting across party and ideological lines to embrace a diverse set of opinions – from opposition parties, non-governmental organisations, the businesses community as

particularly its capacity to respond – can cope, and by ramping up our National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme.

It is important for everyone to remain united and focused on the task at hand by looking at the bigger picture. It is like we are on a flight, and the plane suffers some technical problems that need to be fixed in mid-air to avoid a crash. Instead of focusing on ensuring everyone's safe landing, the crew bicker about changing the pilot instead. Imagine us the rakyat as passengers on that flight - how do we feel?

Lives are at stake in our country, and the rakyat needs to know that we have got our act together to try and help this country exit safely from the pandemic. So, why waste a valuable opportunity to pool our viewpoints, knowledge, ideas and resources systematically via the NRP? I believe the NRP is our best hope yet – and currently our most viable multi-voice solution – in exiting this pandemic.

This is why we have also invited members of opposing political parties like Pakatan Harapan, Warisan and of course, Pejuang, who has unfortunately officially refused the invitation. In gathering viewpoints from as many quarters as possible, a good idea is a good idea, it should not matter who proposes it. In fact, this is exactly what the Finance Ministry did during Budget 2021, when we incorporated various proposals – even from the Opposition parties – in the budget.

Pejuang's rejection aside, this will not stop us from continuing to reach out and engage all sides to consider everyone's views in implementing the NRP. As I have repeatedly said, the plan needs to be dynamic because the virus mutates aggressively, and we need to be agile in adapting the plan to current situations.

Closing ranks does not mean we have to agree with all the policies presented by the government of the day. In fact, many within the council have been the government's fiercest and harshest critics. But when lives are clearly at stake and our healthcare is tottering, we must rise above our differences and work together so we can truly bring the country out of the doldrums of this wretched pandemic.

The NRP is meant to “cover” us until December 2021, and until Covid-19 can be managed as endemic. Beyond December 2021, the nation's recovery will be supported by Budget 2022 to address short-term economic revitalisation efforts, and the 12th Malaysia Plan, representing medium-term strategies to structurally reform the economy.

Domestic political cooperation on managing Covid-19 is not something new. In Canada, policies on economic relief and health safety measures were developed with broad consensus from both sides of the aisle. New Zealand, which has been exemplary in the fight against Covid-19, established a bipartisan committee to oversee the nation's pandemic response. Most recently in South Korea, both the government and opposition came together in a rare bipartisan agreement on additional budgetary allocations.

Our people deserve the same, if not better. Why can't we show the same political will and cooperation to save our rakyat? Our esteemed Parliamentarians did this for the Covid-19 Bill in August 2020, for which I am sure the people are deeply thankful as it enabled aid and assistance to be channelled to the rakyat.

I am confident we will be able to do it again through the NRP. I trust that all stakeholders are rich in their desire to see our beloved country free from the clutches of a devastating global pandemic. We must seize this opportunity to work together, cooperate and ensure that Malaysia gets back on its growth trajectory.

I pray for sense over political satire; and for peace over posturing. Do not let our differences douse the Malaysian spirit to nurse our nation back on its feet again. Let us, for once, put those differences aside, and draw upon that sense of solidarity from deep within each of us, to unite and ensure victory in our war against Covid-19, so we can one day declare that we have Menang Bersama!

Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Abdul Aziz is Malaysia's Finance Minister. The views expressed here are the writer's own.

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