

If a country is an extended family, we have become dysfunctional

Growing up in a three-bedroom home where three generations lived and huddled, we had the occasional family drama and sibling squabbles. When we had difficulties, my grandfather, who revered Confucius as his patriarch, would gather us to help each other out. The extended family was our refuge.

Today, however, I see the nuclear family becoming the norm. Privacy and timeout from the mob are more valued over blood ties. Unresolved issues between distant kin and reminders of less pleasant memories lead to fewer and shorter muted chats.

Reunions have taken on shades of *hiasu* nuances — a cultural peculiarity among urbanised, achievement-driven families. What the family has achieved — or not — is gauged by symbolical representations of perceived material success and occupational category. Hence, the eustress on those who have “made it” and distress on those yet to — the latter being most vulnerable to sly scrutiny by the clan.

Among the younger ones raised in nuclear families, occupational and geographical mobility have diminished their cultural significance of respect for elders and filial bonds. The intergenerational communication gap is stark. The young ones — habitually thumbing through their smart phones — know more about socialising with virtual “friends” in cyberspace than connecting with aunts, uncles and grandparents.

In my frequent trips home, I see among my peers — many are retired now — looking back to those days when writing letters and calling from roadside public phones were the only way to keep in touch with family and friends; when a 60-cent matinee at Cathay followed by a foolhardy swim during a high tide were the main weekend events; when bumi-putera, NEPs, pendatang, shariah and hudud were not in our vocabulary. Race-based NGOs did not exist because they were not necessary then. We got along.

We were a gang of Chinese, Malay and Indian brats — all fairly poor by today’s standards but naively contented then — where brawls were limited to who had struck whose gasing, who stole whose guli or who had cut whose kite lines. We spoke a common lingo — broken English laced with bahasa pasar garnished with Tamil and Hokkien expletives. And in the local market, good-natured banter between Chinese vendors and Malay/Indian customers were par for the course.

We absorbed shades of each other’s cultural values, idiolects and social habits. We were shaped by the times — an extended family of Chinese, Malay and Indian brats where race and religion didn’t matter — until the weeks in May 1969 when we lost our innocence. The fears and suspicions we heard in our family and felt from the neighbours, we carried with us to the schoolyard. May 13, 1969, began the slow implosion of the extended Malaysian family I knew and loved.

Today, I rarely see the physical gathering of chil-



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Say

BY ERIC LOO



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dren and adults across class, race and religion lines. The politicisation of race and religion has crept into the family and communal discourse. Parents project their fears and suspicions to sons and daughters who then carry the racial mindsets to the schoolyards, university grounds, the workplace, social media, email hoaxes and the ballot box. We gravitate to exclusive racial and religious groups. We are secure in our little enclaves.

Indeed, if countries are extended families, we have become dysfunctional. We’re captives of our own corrupt politics. The parents — the government — pamper the firstborn and deny those who came later their birthrights. Spoilt by the preferential treatment, the firstborns are emboldened to spew religious dogma and racist trash talk in the public space with impunity. The capable and gifted siblings are threatened when they step up to demand their birthrights to fair and equal opportunities.

“No way,” say the authoritarian parents. “You live under my roof, you obey my rules. Not happy? You can leave.” More than a million Malaysian professionals have left over the last 30 years, according to World Bank reports.

Much to the pleasure of the extremist fringe groups who have carved a prominent space in the nation’s politics — their trash talk and extremism given legitimacy by the government’s deafening silence on what by definition is clearly hate speech.

We are perceived as corrupt. For context, in the global Corruption Perception Index, in 2013, out of 177 countries, Singapore was ranked 5th (score of 86%); Malaysia was ranked 50th (score 50%). Indeed, for a lack of good parenting skills and of a role model by the political leadership, as a nation state, we have become dysfunctional.

I recall my grandfather’s reverence for Confucius, who described a nation state as an extended family signified by the Mandarin word *guojia*, represented by two characters — *guo* (nation) *jia* (family). *Guojia*

defines the relationship between the state and its people with mutual obligations and duties. The people perform their duties; the state recognises their rights as members of the extended family.

Just as when an extended family falls into difficulties, each family member is obliged to chip in and help out. When a nation state slides into the pits, we have our individual obligations to pull it out from sinking further. Co-prosperity and shared experience are all that matter. Race and religion should not.

As Abraham Lincoln said in his nomination acceptance address to the Illinois Republican Party in Springfield on June 16, 1858: “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.”

In today’s context, the nation certainly cannot endure for long with its racial policies, public corruption, and an administration that’s big on sloganeering and image building, myopic in its racialised politics and bankrupt in its moral standing.

So, how does one stop the cultural implosion and the extended family from becoming more dysfunctional than what it is now?

My grandfather used to say: Take no sides in the family. Set up boundaries on what are acceptable and what are not. Speak a common language that unites rather than divides. Compromise when you can. Give a leg up to those who have fallen behind — if only, with patience, to teach them how to fish for themselves.

Ultimately, the family’s greatness is less measured by showy material gains than how each member is responsible for another. These are the values that make the extended family — the nation — great and its offspring to prosper as one people. ■

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