| conversations |

PICTURES: SAIFUL HIZAM MANSOR/THESUN

Writing the Malaysian story

IMMEDIATELY after Aug 31, 1957, the country embarked on its most ambitious project – nation-building. Many are wondering whether it is not about time now, almost half a century later, to have a critical look at the status of the project, as there is concern that it may have gone a little off-track. A prominent political scientist and human rights activist, Dr Farish A. Noor, thinks new thinking and new vigour are needed to put the project back on its original trajectory. The Penang-born academician, who has taught at the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, and the Institute for Islamic Studies, Frie University of Berlin, is of the view that unless there is a new resolve, the effort to create a secular and democratic nation will continue to founder. How can he be optimistic when racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious divides are even wider than before, he told **ZAINON AHMAD**

"I find it odd that so little attention has been given to the teaching of Malaysia's plural and cosmopolitan past; our shared Hindu-Buddhist roots and the indigenous Indian and Chinese cultural traces that still exist in Malay culture, for instance."

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theSun: What do you think of Malaysia as a nation almost half a century after independence? What do you think our founding fathers would say if they are looking at us now?
A: It is undeniable that Malaysia has changed, and we need not ask what our founding fathers might think of the country today – even for someone like myself, born in 1967, I honestly cannot say that this is the Malaysia I once knew and recognised. We seem to have forgotten the simple fact that when Malaysia was created in 1957, it was meant to be a constitutional democracy and not a theocratic state beholden to any particular religion. I reserve my loyalty and commitment to that secular democratic state, and no other.

The cosmetic changes are, I think, evident all around us: Malaysia's economic success has been translated into material prowess and largess to such an extent that the entire country seems to have transformed itself into a gigantic shopping mall. But accompanying that culture of crass materialism and consumerism is a superficial understanding of what it means to be

Malaysian, and a renewed and increasingly assertive expression of communitarian group-feeling. Just recently I walked into a post office in central KL and could not help but notice that the staff were almost entirely Malay-Muslim. With the foregrounding of the Malay-Muslim community has come the foregrounding of Malay-Muslim symbols of identity. On the walls of the post office were pictures of Mecca and sentences from the Quran, in Arabic. One wonders how the Malay staff of the post office might react if another staff member, say an Indian or Chinese, who might be Hindu, Buddhist or Christian, were to put up an image of Jesus or quotes of the Buddha. In this respect, despite the oft-repeated claims of this being a plural multiracial society, I would argue that Malaysians are even more divided now than ever before.

Despite all these things you mentioned, we are a nation, aren't we?
Yes we are, but I think only in the most superficial sense of having a common territory and occupying it. The Malaysian nation-building project, like all nation-building projects, was an artificial enterprise to begin with. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with that per se as we all know by now that there are no essentialist underpinnings to any national identity. Even the German notion that the German nation is bound by common ties of Germanic blood is patently false.

But for Malaysia and Malaysians to come together as a nation we need to proceed beyond mere rhetoric and symbolism; we need to recognise our shared hybrid past and our shared common destiny, to the point where every citizen thinks to himself: "If this nation collapses, then so will I. My fate is linked to the well-being and future of this nation and my neighbours are not aliens to myself." But I seriously doubt that such common feelings exist right now; and my fear is that whatever sense of common bonding has eroded even further over the past few decades.

Why do you take that pessimistic view?
As I said, the signs of communitarian-sectarian divisions and narrow communal assertion are all

there. Honestly, can we say that we have transcended the boundaries of race, ethnicity and religion in this country? Look at the scare campaigns that dominate the vernacular press. Recently there was a complaint that too many Malay women were marrying non-Malay men. I certainly see nothing wrong with that, and in fact I am all for it, being in a mixed-race relationship myself. But obviously for some sections of Malaysian society, the fear of cross-cultural contact and hybridisation has become a major concern. But what these people fail to understand is the simple fact that scientifically there is no such thing as racial difference: there is only one race, that is the human race. Differences of colour, language, etc are superficial normative distinctions, that is all. They certainly should not be a barrier to forming relationships.

Then there are the religious Pharisees in our midst who complicate the matter further by saying that Muslims can only marry other Muslims. Even in cases where Christian women want to marry Muslim men – a practice that is recognised and allowed in many other Muslim countries – here in Malaysia they are forced to convert. The religious demagogues fail to see that any forced conversion can only be a false one, yet they maintain this hypocritical posture for the sake of communal political ends.

The net result of this is the imposition of yet another barrier between Malays and other races, Muslims and other religious groups. There are many other Muslim countries where marriages between Muslim men and Christian women are allowed, but we choose instead to maintain a practice that has no strong basis in Islamic jurisprudence or even history. Why is this the case? I can only conclude that this is part and parcel of the demographic politics of the country, where keeping the communities apart is one way of maintaining the communitarian political culture of the country, and to serve the interests of the race-based parties in power. So how can we say we have come together as a nation?

Will the growing assertiveness of Islam stand in the way of creating a Malaysia which we have often touted as a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural nation?
The "problem" has nothing to do with Islam per se. Islam is not at

fault here, for Islam certainly does not ask for anything.

Malaysian Muslims, like Muslims the world over these days, seem to be caught between two urges: On the one hand the need to assert their identity and presence on the national political stage, and on the other an increasingly parochial and defensive outlook towards the world. Popular Islamic discourse is now replete with bogus claims about "hidden threats" and "menaces" against Islam and Muslims. Today when one reads the internet or popular vernacular press, all we seem to see are claims that Muslims are in danger, and the dangers are numerous: from the so-called threat of liberal secularism to Western culture; from the menace of apostasy to Muslims marrying non-Muslims, etc. But who engineers these scare campaigns, if not our own politicians and leaders? Was it not the Malaysian political elite who spearheaded the "Asian values" debate and fuelled the fear that Asian culture would be wiped out by foreign influences?

There is a growing concern among non-Muslims and many Muslims – they may be in a majority, the silent ones – that Islam is gradually taking up more space in a country where only 54% of the population are Muslims. There is more Islam in national school these days, they say. In your years of research and observation, do you sense this?
Yes. I find it odd that so little attention has been given to the teaching of Malaysia's plural and cosmopolitan past; our shared Hindu-Buddhist roots and the indigenous Indian and Chinese cultural traces that still exist in Malay culture, for instance. It is impossible to deny that Islam has been instrumentalised by successive Umno-led governments, firstly in their bid to "out-Islamise" PAS, and secondly in their attempt to use Islam to shore up the Malay communitarian vote bank. So while I am appalled by what is happening to and in our education system these days, I am not surprised at all.

The danger, however, comes when this divisive and destructive official rhetoric seeps down to the level of the mundane and everyday. I like to think that human beings are naturally good and innocent and that we become communitarian as a result of the overbearing pressures of communitarian politics brought to bear on us. The saddest thing, how-

conversations

"Over the past year, I was approached by three mixed-race couples who were in a state of turmoil because the laws and prevailing cultural norms of Malaysia do not allow them to marry and retain their religious/racial differences. Two of them decided to emigrate and one couple was sadly forced to break up. This, for me, is the real tragedy of Malaysia."

ever, is that this perverse ideological discourse often finds itself reproduced even on the level of the everyday: note how racist terms are still used in the media, even in entertainment programmes. Even in academic circles we still find scholars and students who conduct social science analysis with categories like "Malay", "Chinese" and "Indian" left intact and undeconstructed. Where is the long-awaited auto-critique of Malaysian identity that should have come with the maturation of the nation? Clearly we are nowhere close to that.

In the meantime we have to live in a society where distrust and prejudice prevail on all levels. Parents turn blue and hysterical when they discover their son or daughter is going out with someone of a different race or religious background; racist jokes and sexist jibes remain commonplace – even in Parliament – and communal distrust and apathy towards the plight of others predominates this so-called "caring society" we are trying to build. Over the past year, I was approached by three mixed-race couples who were in a state of turmoil because the laws and prevailing cultural norms of Malaysia do not allow them to marry and retain their religious/racial differences. Two of them decided to emigrate and one couple was sadly forced to break up. This, for me, is the real tragedy of Malaysia.

And do you think that the political discourse of the country has not changed over the years? How many times have we heard the same old rhetoric?
Every time a matter of national interest looms over the horizon and threatens to question the status quo, we are presented with the same bogus spectre of "May 13" all over again. This is a country haunted by its past, but the official rendition of the past is a selective one: Why bring up May 13 again and again, when we can turn to centuries of inter-cultural co-operation instead as a positive example of what Malaysia can be and what Malaysia ought to be?

The deliberate cultivation of fear is the easiest and most convenient way for ruling elites to keep the masses in line. Whenever there is an issue that has to be dealt with in a rational, open and objective manner, the demagogues go back to the same stale rhetoric of communal fears and conspiracy theories.

That is why Malaysian politics is replete with the same slogans: "Islam in danger", "Malays in danger", "Chinese in danger", etc.

Why do you think this is happening? Many are asking: why have we moved away from those days of so much religious tolerance?
I think we seriously need to rethink this premise: Was there ever any real religious tolerance to begin with? We all know that for centuries this has been a multi-ethnic and multireligious nation, but to what extent was there any real tolerance?

And in any case, I am not too comfortable with the idea of tolerance. Our leaders tell the world that Malaysian society is tolerant of pluralism and diversity, but tolerance is just one step before outright confrontation. Surely we should have gone further, and made acceptance of difference and alterity one of our common national goals. In this respect I think the real situation is far more dismal. I certainly see little evidence that Malaysians accept their differences, or are proud of them and able to live with them comfortably.

I agree with you but how could you have gone about making people accept their differences when there are those who are attempting to make the whole Malaysian society homogeneous?
Here we need to distinguish between the State and Society. All states – not just the Malaysian state – are motivated and guided by the logic of governmentality that wants to colonise society and to reduce it to a simplified, manageable entity that is homogenous. The logic of the state is imperialist by nature, and all states are really local empires that seek to colonise, police, control and dominate their citizens. It is easier for politicians and bureaucrats to govern a society where people can be reduced to statistics and numbers; to be guided and herded like sheep.

But society is far more complex, fluid and adaptable. Society is made up of individual actors and agents who possess rational agency, free will and goals of their own, and as such these variables will ensure that society is in permanent flux and evolution. The logic of society is contrary to that of the state: while the state seeks to control and dominate its subjects, citizens wish to retain their autonomy and identity as differentiated individuals. The clash between these two contradictory logics is what we call the moment of the political, and is the crux of the political process itself.

That is why despite the pessimistic tone I take with the state and governments in general, I still place my faith in ordinary human beings like you and I. The most interesting groups in society are always the marginal and subaltern: In a country like Malaysia, I often marvel at the ingenuity of groups like the gay/lesbian community, the religious apostates, the marginalised pribumi minorities, mixed-race couples, etc and how they manage to carve a space for themselves within the leitmotif of the national culture. This is how society actually works: technocrats, bureaucrats and politicians can plan all they like, but they cannot factor in the local genius of local individuals who have their own way of doing things and getting round the law. Look at the hidden community of Malay-Muslim lesbians, for instance, who outwardly may adopt all the "right" symbols of Muslim female identity, including the headscarf. But their private lives are another matter and the

state, no matter how hard it tries, cannot reach into the private spaces.

My main desire now is to seek ways to empower these marginalised subaltern groupings so that they no longer have to hide in the dark and live in a state of constant denial. Citizens should not fear the state or deny themselves, for in fact it is the state that is in denial: Denial of the complexities of life and the diversity and alterity in our society. We need to overturn the prevailing logic of racial, ethnic and religious polarisation that has become hegemonised in this society of ours, so that one day a mixed-race couple may proudly say "we are the norm and we are proud of the fact that we love each other beyond the boundaries of race and culture. We, not the cultural, racial and religious bigots, are the true Malaysians, and our story is the real Malaysian story."

Is it because the Islamisation policy of the government in the 1980s have proven to be more successful than it envisaged? Or has it spawned something else?
Forgive me if I sound cynical here, but from a political scientist's point of view the entire Islamisation policy had little to do with Islam or the promotion of Islamic ethics, but more to do with creating a massive (and costly) parallel bureaucracy whose main aim was to employ Malaysian Muslims with the hope that they would not fall out of the bureaucratic net and thereby end up voting for the Opposition. To put it bluntly, it was just another case of a post-colonial Muslim state forestalling the moment of state breakdown by buying off potential opposition via

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the creation of jobs and promise of employment.

But Malaysia is not unique in this respect and the same mistakes were made in Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sudan, Nigeria and Iran. The net result, however, is the creation of a state within a state, a costly and unproductive parallel state machinery that could not be sustained indefinitely. It was fine as long as the boom years pumped money into the state's coffers, and thus guaranteed the possibility of patronage. But as soon as the 1997-98 economic crisis struck, the financial weakness of Malaysia – made worse by the rise of new markets in China and India – meant that the economic pie grew smaller and there were less resources to go around. Now can the state maintain these policies into the future? I think not.

But then how does it begin scaling down the parallel Islamic bureaucracy without suffering a political backlash? This is what many academics like myself have been warning of for the past 10 years,

But surely something must be done. Surely we have not reached a point of no return – not yet for now at least. What do you think will persuade the powers that be that they must begin the scaling down?
Politicians ought to be treated with extreme caution and a large dose of healthy skepticism. Nonetheless, they are capable of reform and reflection if we induce them with the right arguments. One argument – which I frankly am loathe to use and which I think is a weak one – is the "Malaysia's International image" argument. It is evident that as the country slides towards a more religiously

conservative register, our international standing and image will suffer. Just look at the image of Aceh province in Indonesia after the local government whipped some people for allegedly gambling there. Immediately Aceh is put in the same category as Saudi Arabia. Now do we want Malaysia to end up in the same boat? In the case of the two men sentenced to whipping for drinking alcohol, the net effect will be the same.

But the real argument has to go beyond such short-termist pragmatism. Again from a political scientist's point of view, I would argue that we have reached the stage where there is a dispersion of power and the weakening of the executive branch of the state. If we allow local religious courts to impose more sentences like this, or allow local self-appointed moral police to go around harassing Malaysian citizens like they have done, then the nett result will be the weakening of state power and the erosion of the state.

The government has to state clearly its stand on this matter: Is Malaysia a constitutional democracy still or have we become a theocratic state? The ambiguity of the present situation is one of the reasons why the nation-building project has failed. The government comes up with all kinds of grand schemes (like national service) to instil patriotism among the younger generation of Malaysians: but loyalty to what? To which state? The Malaysian state of 1957 or some new revisionist religious state dreamt up by a cabal of unseen and unaccountable religious ideologues?

Having said that, allow me to

conversations

also state that I do have problems with the Constitution itself, as there are still laws like the ISA (Internal Security Act) that should have been done away with long ago. The failure to reform the system and to address issues like the ISA is one of the reasons why more and more Malaysians – Muslims in particular – are opting out and demanding a radically different alternative. The call for an Islamic state can be read in these terms, as a sort of subaltern plea for a systematic overhaul of the political order and its institutions.

Do you see incidents like the raids on nightclubs, the caning sentence on two Malay Muslim men for drinking stout – never done before – as indications of the growing assertiveness of the ulama?
It is not the ulama who are assertive, and the term "ulama" has to be kept to its original meaning of "learned scholar". I have nothing against the ulama and in fact I think one thing that might save this country is the entry of some genuine, world-wise and enlightened ulama who have a truly open, universal and globalised outlook. The true ulama is someone who is schooled in all disciplines, including social sciences, history, politics, philosophy, logic and the sciences. True ulama would be the last to fling a *fatwa* at a drop of a hat for political ends: they would weigh all the factors, consult each other and engage in a dialogue with society and the state.

Our problems are not coming from the ulama per se: It was the state's own religious bureaucracy flexing its muscles and wanting to test the limits of its power vis-à-vis the executive. After being in positions of power and authority for so long, the functionaries of this parallel religious bureaucracy now want to demonstrate that they too have the power to assert their will on the national political arena, and they are doing precisely that.

The executive, on the other hand, has responded in the mildest of ways, lending weight to the belief that it cannot and will not stand before the advance of the religio-conservatives in our midst.

Do you think the government, in attempting to cope with what has been termed as Islamic revivalism and to out-Islam PAS, has merely stumbled from one policy to the next but without really looking at the core of the problem? That it grabbed at what it thought was the best solution at the time without really thinking about future implications?
Yes. I do not think that Umno and the BN coalition ever really had a policy vis-a-vis PAS. The Islamisation race really began in 1960, after PAS scored a major victory at the 1959 elections and won control of Kelantan and Terengganu. The government of the day – then under the Tunku – did not expect this result and did not know how to react. The next year, Tunku and the Umno-led government had the country's first Quran-reading contest to show how "Islamic" Umno was. They failed to realise that the appeal of PAS then (it was under the leadership of Burhanuddin al-Helmy) was because it championed the cause of the poor farmers and rural community of Kelantan and Terengganu.

Failing to understand that, Umno and the Tunku's government opted for a cosmetic and short-term approach instead. Believing that PAS was concerned only about Islam, they sought to

demonstrate their own Islamic credentials in their own superficial way. Since 1960, successive Umno-led governments have been making the same embarrassing mistake, and as a result the country's political arena has been moving closer and closer to the Islamic register.

Where do you think all this will lead us? Some people are saying that if the religious functionaries are not held back, Malaysia would be a de facto Islamic state. Will growing Islamisation of Malaysia lead to a further erosion of democracy as practised in the country?
As I've said time and again, the Islamisation policy of the Mahathir administration as well as the present Abdullah administration has merely laid down the blueprint and framework for an Islamic state. All the tools, laws, instruments and institutions are already there, waiting to be used. As was during the recent case when two Muslim men were sentenced to whipping for drinking alcohol, the religious conservatives are merely waiting for the right moment to strike and show their hand.

Umno still doesn't understand that it was they – not PAS – who turned Malaysian into this proxy Islamic state by default, thanks to their own misguided attempts to use Islam to blunt the advance of PAS.
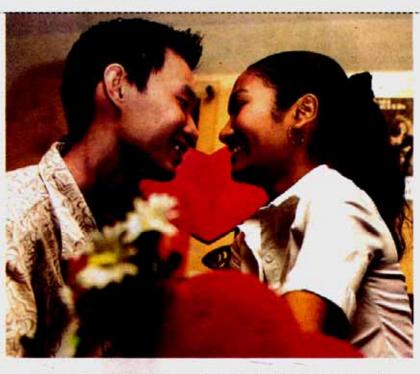
But let us remember that all this is possible mainly because of the political culture of Malaysia which has been, and remains, largely undemocratic in nature. Umno's small band of urban liberals may bemoan the hudud laws of PAS and PAS's vision of an Islamic state modelled on Iran, Sudan, Pakistan or Afghanistan. But even without PAS there remained the very real dangers to democracy represented by Umno's own brand of authoritarian politics, with laws such as the ISA, Emergency Ordinance, Sedition Act, Universities and University Colleges Act, etc. Umno's leaders are in no position to lecture PAS on democracy and fundamental freedoms as long as they continue to use laws like the ISA. Furthermore the state-sponsored and routinised authoritarian culture of Umno's politics has merely set the standards for the conservative politics of PAS.

Honestly, why are we so worried about PAS's stated aim of creating an Islamic state when we still haven't addressed the realities of living under the draconian laws of Umno? I will worry about the mullahs chopping off my head when the day comes – but in the meantime there are plenty of other things we need to be concerned about: The fate of so many people under detention without trial; refugees and asylum-seekers being left to rot in detention centres; abuse of police powers; routine abuse of foreign domestic workers; the unresolved cases of corruption that pile up by the day; the lack of press freedom, academic freedom and fundamental rights for Malaysians from all walks of life. It is precisely this authoritarian, undemocratic climate that provides the fertile ground for religious conservatism to thrive in the future.

Umno leaders want young people to be intelligent enough not to be lured by religious militants – but how can they expect that when their political culture does not even encourage critical thinking among the young?

Do you think Umno leaders have been so taken up by this idea of Malay dominance that

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they are no longer looking at things in their proper perspective anymore? And that Umno and the Umno-led BN government have to have those tough laws you mentioned because they fear losing the dominance? The two are intimately linked: As I've said, the fundamental premise of Malaysian politics and the BN ruling formula is the flawed idea that there exists racial differences. To talk of a "Malay", "Chinese" and "Indian" party presupposes that there exists such things as a "Malay", "Chinese" and "Indian" race, which is logically wrong.

But having created a political system based on such illogical ideas, there can be no other way of maintaining the system with all its internal contradictions without the use of repressive laws. The fragility of the Malaysian model means that it can only be sustained by force and the threat of state repression and violence. That is why I do not believe that the BN coalition can ever seriously abandon laws like the ISA, Sedition Act, etc.

PAS recently said those will not be the models for its administration when it wins power at the centre. It will rule democratically, "using our own model". What do you think?
I will say this about PAS: Since its formation in 1951, PAS has been a constitutional party that has always played by the rules. It has gone through some questionable phases, like the Asri (Muda) years of 1970-1982 when it was seen as a profoundly racist communitarian party, and the years of the "ulama faction" of 1982-1998. But PAS has demonstrated a keen sense of realism and pragmatism in its politics, and if its new political leadership wants to move it closer to a democratic agenda then I think they should be given a chance.

The fortunes of PAS and Umno are interlinked and the internal politics of both parties are reflective of each other. If PAS makes the long-awaited transition to democratic politics, then it may

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induce Umno to democratise itself as well. After more than 20 years of a wasteful and destructive Islamisation race between Umno and PAS, what they and the country need now is a "democratisation race" between the two.

While on the subject of PAS, let us not forget the role of the other component parties of the BN as well.

If PAS is responsible for upping the ante in the Islamisation race, then the other BN component parties like MCA, MIC and others are also guilty of sitting passively by. Where was the outcry when this country was unilaterally declared an Islamic state? Did the leaders of MCA and MIC not realise the long-term implications of such a move? It is pathetic to see how each of these parties is more concerned with its own narrow communitarian politics, and it is precisely this divisive form of sectarian-communitarian politics practised by all parties in Malaysia that will ultimately divide our nation.

I think leaders of the MCA, MIC and other BN component parties realise the implications of the Islamisation race, including the government declaration that Malaysia is an Islamic state. But they have been cautious about making public statements about it. Do you think they are not speaking against it publicly because they fear they might be told to stay out of it – that it is about Islam and therefore no concern of theirs?
But DAP leader Lim Kit Siang has been most vocal about his opposition. Maybe the component party leaders have spoken their mind about their dissatisfaction over Islamisation and the declaration that Malaysia is an Islamic state during the closed sessions of the BN council. Could be, don't you think?
I'm sure there must have been rumblings of discontent among the leaders of the BN component parties, but then again these rumblings were kept secret and

were never made public. This in itself is a reflection of our lack of transparency in Malaysia and the generally cautious approach to all issues, which is due to our paranoia about "social instability and unrest". The BN parties have always stuck to this formula, and it may have worked during the founding decades of 1950-60.

But Malaysia has changed so much over the years that we now have a society that is far more cosmopolitan, exposed, globally connected than ever before.

For the umpteenth time, I wish that Malaysia's politicians would develop the courage and maturity to discuss things in an open, tolerant, intelligent and frank manner – if that is not asking too much of them.

After nearly half a century the Malaysian state is surely strong enough to deal with such debates and they ought to be carried out here, in the public arena, in full public view. That would be the only way to gain the trust of the public, and to bring the public into the process of deliberation and governance. We are not children or sheep and should not be treated as such. In any case, I seriously question the moral and intellectual credibility of our "leaders" to discuss things with a clear level mind.

Over the years we have been treated to enough ridiculous proposals – from planting padi on rooftops, to "mass circumcision ceremonies" to attract tourists, to debating the shape and form of MAS airline stewardesses' uniforms – to convince us that our politicians should not be allowed to debate such matters in private and unaided.

Finally, how and where do you see your role in all this? You have been writing about Malaysian politics and Islam for more than 10 years now. What has been your guiding principles and what kept you going?
I was sustained mainly by a steady supply of cheap cigarettes and the burning desire to knock some sense in the heads of people! I was and remain a political scientist and a human rights activist. In my work, I try to combine my disciplinary concerns with my personal concern to see the birth of a genuinely plural and inclusive Malaysia where even marginal no-hopers like me would have a place. I do worry about this country's future, and I regret the fact that due to local circumstances I have had to teach and research abroad. Time and again I was asked to come back to Malaysia and teach here: but to do what? As a political scientist, I have to research and lecture about my subject in the most objective and impartial way I can. This has become next to impossible these days, when even academic work and the writing of history has become so blatantly politicised.

The writing of the Malaysian story is still a project that has to be initiated. It has to be a story that is inclusive, and therefore complex, confounding and even problematic. But as I've said before elsewhere, let that story be an interesting one at least, where every Malaysian citizen can find his or her place in the grand narrative of the nation. My stake, my future, my destiny, lies here – and I intend to claim it as my right as a Malaysian. The basis of Malaysian politics has to be the simple universal concept of Malaysian citizenship. It is on that playing field that our struggle for our future has to be fought.