

# Building a united, cohesive nation through NCC2

Prominent banker Datuk Nazir Razak has again articulated the need for a second National Consultative Council (NCC2). This call has been supported by a number of political parties, including certain parties within the governing Barisan Nasional and senior politicians like Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, who was the former minister of international trade and industry.

I strongly endorse the need for NCC2 and future NCCs as they become necessary for Malaysia to become a cohesive nation and an effective state. Building a cohesive nation and developing an effective state are long-term processes that may take several decades, if not centuries.

In all likelihood, nation- and state-building will suffer periodic setbacks, especially when the previous basis for forming a nation and state has worn thin or is no longer relevant, as appears to be the case presently. Many NCCs may be required along the way. Although the constitution and modus operandi of each NCC would vary with the prevailing circumstances, the purpose will remain the same: to promote the development of a united and cohesive nation and an effective, participatory state to serve all citizens of the country.

Established by the director of the National Operations Council after the 1969 racial riots, the purpose of the first NCC was to “establish positive and practical guidelines for inter-racial cooperation and social integration for the growth of a Malaysian national identity”.

The focus was on nation-building and on redressing imbalances in society, especially in the economic domain, that were deemed to undermine stability. Established by and under the firm control of the incumbent government, the NCC resulted in the drawing up of a key declaratory document called the Rukun Negara (national principles).

It also laid the groundwork for an economic policy that came to be known as the New Economic Policy (NEP) that emphasised affirmative action for bumiputeras to bring them on par with non-Malays to promote stability.

The Rukun Negara has since ceased to be a key guiding document and strong reservations have been expressed over the content and implementation of the NEP. The NEP has since given way to the National Development Policy (NDP) that was adopted in 1990/91 as part of (former prime minister) Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s vision of a Bangsa Malaysia. Notwithstanding the vision of a Malaysian Malaysia, the NDP continues to pursue key elements of the NEP, especially the policy of affirmative action for bumiputeras.

Race and religion have formed the basis for nation-building in Malaysia in the lead-up to and since independence in 1957. That basis, however, has worn thin over the years and may no longer be adequate to capture the current political dynamics in the country. Having lived in the country for several generations, many non-Malays no longer accept the distinction between bumiputera and non-bumiputera, and contest the differing obligations and privileges based on that distinction.

They seek equal treatment under the law. A significant percentage of the Malay population, especially those living in urban areas, also seeks to go beyond racial and religious underpinnings of the Malaysian nation and state. Although some segments, especially those engaged in political mobilisation, continue to emphasise race and religion, it appears that there is growing aspiration in the Malaysian polity to ground the nation and state in beliefs that go beyond race and religion.

The pillars of the political system that rested on so-called “bargains” among communities at the time of independence in 1957 have also weakened. For a number of reasons, the legitimacy of the one-party dominant political system in Malaysia, with concentration of power in Kuala Lumpur, has eroded over time. It is now opportune and necessary to review and redefine the basis for nation- and state-building.

My own perspective is that Malaysia should move away from an ethno-religious nation toward a civic nation with certain ethnic features that treat all citizens on an equal basis without favouring any

particular ethnic group. That basis should facilitate inclusive, multiple and overlapping identities.

On nation-building, my view is that measures should be instituted to strengthen democracy in the country, including strengthening federalism, devolving more power and authority to states, reducing the power of the executive branch of government, enhancing the power and role of Parliament, recognising the key role of the Council of Rulers and enhancing the standing and role of civil society.

State institutions must be strengthened and made more representative of the multiracial and multi-religious make-up of the country. The state and its systems should rid themselves of money politics and corruption. The state must become more effective, transparent, accountable and responsive to all citizens.

Change is also required in the system of political mobilisation. The present emphasis on race and religion must gradually give way to a system that encourages multi-racial and multi-religious political mobilisation. As ethnicity is deeply ingrained in Malaysian politics, its significance can only be reduced over time but there is no reason to presume it will persist forever. These are just my thoughts.

The NCC2 must discuss and develop the basis for the Malaysian nation and state for the next stage. It should be tasked with exploring measures to strengthen democracy, political participation and effective governance in the country in the years ahead. The NCC2 should direct itself to formulating the ideological basis and key policy measures for the next stage in the development of the Malaysian nation and state.

Firm control by the executive branch of government was not an issue for the first NCC. In fact, Tun Abdul Razak — the father of current Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and Nazir — then director of the National Operations Council, initiated and headed the first NCC. Despite the setback in the 1969 general election, the then government had strong legitimacy, and the public was receptive to government control and direction. Top-down politics was the name of the game in the lead-up to and after 1957. Political leaders could negotiate on behalf of communities.

But that situation no longer prevails. Confidence in government has deteriorated sharply and ethnic communities have fragmented. Concurrently, Malaysian civil society, though still suffering several weaknesses, has become stronger. Overall, the citizenry has become more sophisticated and unwilling to sheepishly follow commands from above.

Though some political leaders persist with the notion (of top-down politics), it appears that the Malaysian political context is no longer conducive to such politics. Hence, an NCC2 initiated and controlled by the government will no longer be credible.

The key is for the NCC2 to have strong political, legal and moral authority so that its recommendations will be taken seriously and implemented by all concerned. For this to happen, its initiation must have the blessing of several authorities, including the Cabinet, Parliament and the Council of Rulers.

In the final analysis, the NCC2 must be authorised by Parliament and must be required to submit its recommendations to Parliament, which must endorse them for action by the Cabinet and Council of Rulers.

The legitimacy and authority of the NCC2 can also be enhanced by a credible composition and a transparent modus operandi. The NCC2 must comprise members who command wide support in society and whose commitment to Malaysia is beyond doubt. Representation is important but so is expertise.

The NCC2 must include eminent persons, including strong and unbiased intellectuals drawn from all segments of society. It can include persons from government, political parties and the civil service sector but the key criteria for selection should be the ability to think independently and contribute ideas. It must also include conceptual thinkers.

To enhance its authority, the NCC2 must make



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its proceedings transparent. All key issues must be discussed openly, both among its members and important segments of society. In addition to regular interactions among its members, the NCC2 should hold dialogue sessions with the government of the day at the federal and state levels, with political parties of all stripes, with relevant research institutions and think tanks, with eminent civil society leaders and with all other interested groups.

It should also draw on lessons and examples from other countries. It should be tasked with producing a short report, including policy recommendations, to be submitted to Parliament, the executive and the Council of Rulers. The report should be widely publicised and be available to the public. Transparency of proceedings and the rationale for the recommendations are crucial.

The establishment, constitution and modus operandi of NCC2 must take due account of political developments in the country. Most importantly, the proposed NCC2 should not be seen as an arm of, or under the control of, the government, whose moral authority has worn thin. Likewise, the NCC2 should not be dominated by any single civil society or business group. It should be funded from public funds and formed by a charter approved by the supreme body of the land — Parliament. It should be able to accept financial contributions with no strings attached from any source.

Nazir himself or another person of stature from the business sector or civil society can initiate the effort in consultation with the government (executive branch and Parliament) and the Council of Rulers. Alternatively, the executive branch of the government, in close consultation with the civil society and business leaders and the Council of Rulers, may initiate the exercise.

The final charter — establishing the NCC — must be approved in Parliament. This approach will ensure that the NCC carries the necessary political, legal and moral authority and that its recommendations are taken seriously by all concerned. ■

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