

07/03/1997

Merits of programme a hot topic

Sam Cheong

MILITARY-style national service was a much debated issue at one time. Now the Government is once again considering implementing national service - without the military content.

Problems attributed to social ills among Malaysian youth and the shortcomings of the Rakan Muda programme were among the reasons why policy-makers are considering the National Social Service (NSS) programme.

In a recent statement, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the introduction of the NSS would be one way to combat the escalating problems among Malaysian youth.

The concept of military national service is not new as it was implemented in 1958 and 1963 during the communist insurgency and the Malaysia-Indonesia confrontation.

The programme was dismantled when the threat ended. Malaysia's second Prime Minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak, mooted the idea of reinstating NS in the early '70s as a measure to beef up the nation's security forces.

This did not materialise as the country was in its early development stages at the time and funds were insufficient. Reinstatement of the military national service became a highly-debated issue throughout the '70s.

In 1975, at the height of the Indochina conflict, DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang voiced support for compulsory military service.

He pledged his party's loyalty and patriotism by volunteering himself and all DAP members to defend the country against foreign military threats.

Former opposition MP Datuk Lee Lam Thye, who was with the party then, voiced his views in newspaper articles about national service as a youth development programme.

Lee reaffirmed his stand in his recent column in the New Straits Times, but only as a compulsory non-military social service programme.

He envisioned getting youths involved in community services to bridge the generation gap between the young and the elderly.

Compulsory military service was deemed unnecessary during the early '80s when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad came to power. The idea was put on hold until recently. The Prime Minister announced in 1992 that there are plans to introduce the national service as a non-military youth development programme.

In contrast, Singapore made military national service a must for all men aged 18 and above by passing the National Service Bill in the late '60s.

After completing their A-levels, Singaporean men are required to undergo full military service for a period of two and a-half years.

NS defaulters face imprisonment for dodging the draft. Exceptions are given to individuals with physical and mental impairments.

Malaysian permanent residents are encouraged to enlist with the NS to earn Singaporean citizenship. Compulsory military service or National Service (NS) is also implemented in other Asian countries such as Taiwan and South Korea.

Western countries like Sweden, Switzerland, Holland, Austria, Germany, France, Norway and Denmark also have such youth development programmes.

Combat readiness through military training was deemed necessary in European countries during the height of the Cold War.

Compulsory military service in Germany came under heavy opposition

recently from a youth group who call themselves Kampagne Gegen Wherphlict.
The group set up a homepage on the Internet to protest the drafting of young Germans into military service.

Similar protests can be found on the Internet concerning national service in Saudi Arabia and Spain. In addition, there are many articles condemning the programme on private homepages.

Some who have undergone such programmes have used them as career advancement opportunity. Many jobseekers from Europe have advertised their NS experience over the Internet to seek well-paying jobs.

Others point out that the military looks after youths and keeps them away from harm's reach.

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