

21/09/1999

Our youths are a pragmatic lot

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Of late, there has been much focus on university students and their activities. From a recent study on perceptions of national identity among Universiti Malaya students, the image of the highly political and anti-establishment individuals bent on demonstrating and rioting does not emerge.

Of course, the findings may be particular only to the said varsity and not applicable to other universities. But what emerged is that most students are motivated by a high degree of pragmatism, interested in getting a degree and a good job, and value a stable country and good leadership. The torch-brandishing rebels are a very, very small minority.

In order to ascertain the level of consensus among young Malaysians and to determine whether they possess a common Malay-sian outlook, an exploratory study was carried out among a sample of 200 UM students from various ethnic groups studying the arts and humanities, science, and education. The sample were mainly second and third-year students.

The students thought of themselves as members of their ethnic group first - as Malays, Chinese or Indians - and as Malaysians second. Only 10 per cent of the students identified themselves as Malaysians first.

Although all three ethnic groups chose Malay as the language they are most fluent in, it appears to have a specific role. It is seen as an official language and is used in formal situations. It is also used to converse with other ethnic groups.

When interacting informally or socially, Chinese students indicate that they tend to speak to each other quite often in Chinese dialects but a mixture of English and Malay is also used. Similarly, Indian students indicate they use Indian languages and a mixture of English and Malay when speaking among themselves.

English is considered important but most have a level of fluency that ranges from poor to average.

While Malaysia is the preferred country of residence for all Malay and Indian students, it is the first choice of 78 per cent of the Chinese. A common reason for choosing Malaysia is that it is peaceful, stable and a fast-developing country. Many students are optimistic that they would be able to get a good job. Another reason given is that Malaysia is their country of birth.

Social interaction is conducted mainly on ethnic lines. Inter-ethnic interaction is mainly functional such as during lectures and tutorials. Outside of lectures, inter-ethnic interaction occurs during projects, field trips, sports and activities organised by societies and residential colleges. There is less social interaction among students who stayed off-campus.

When asked to choose the national leader they admired, about 30 per cent chose Tunku Abdul Rahman, 29 per cent Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and about 21 per cent, Tun Abdul Razak. There is a greater consensus among the Chinese and Indians but almost one-third of the Malays expressed a preference for various other leaders. Leaders from MCA and MIC were least chosen, not even by the Chinese and Indian students themselves. A similar finding was obtained in an earlier survey among Form Four students.

From the responses of the students, a number of positive points with regards to race relations emerges. The majority of the respondents speak Bahasa Malaysia fluently, support national leaders and their policies, and

believe that Malaysia is a good country to live in - a sense of loyalty is one reason for their choice.

On the negative aspects, ethnic sub-cultural variations and linguistic loyalties based on primordial ties are still being strongly felt. The ethnic denominator is very important and the sensitivity towards ethnicity and culture felt by the various groups should be given due consideration. It has to be admitted that ethnic polarisation among students is a worrying trend and needs to be addressed immediately.

The youths are a source which should be channeled positively but they need to be managed sensitively. They need to be thought of as young thinking adults worthy of respect. Some of the youth-bashing we have witnessed recently has to be stopped. Praise is more effective than criticism and helps to build esteem and self-worth too.