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Focus: Ghazali-Malays

WHY ARE MALAY STUDENTS WEAK IN THEIR STUDIES: "KING GHAZ"

By: Ali Mamat

KUALA LUMPUR (Bernama) - The question of Malay students being weak in their studies are still bandied about today, the latest being the performance of these students in several Egyptian universities.

The Malay students are generally said to be behind other races, especially in important disciplines like science, technology, medicine, engineering and computer, to the extent that some claimed that it might have to do with their genetic make-up.

It is not clear how sensitive are the policy-makers, implementors and the Malay society itself to this problem. But it certainly hurts the national leaders like Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who had spoken openly about this state of affairs.

The same disappointment is shared by an eminent political veteran, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, who had played a key role in the early formation of Malaysia as well as the formulation of the New Economic Policy to re-structure the political, economic and social landscape of the country following the racial riots of May 13, 1969.

Ghazali who is fondly called "King Ghaz" for his stern and no-nonsense approach to work, was also a central figure in the National Economic Consultative Council (NECC) which he chaired after his retirement from cabinet. At that time, he was also special adviser to the Prime Minister on matters relating to foreign affairs.

Before his retirement, he had held that cabinet posts, as the Minister with Special Function after the May 13 incident, followed by the Information portfolio, the Home Ministry and lastly as the Foreign Minister.

GHAZALI'S NOT A "RACIST"

In a recent interview, Ghazali stressed at the onset that he should not be mistaken for a "racist" but a Malay nationalist by what he says.

And as a nationalist, he is indeed upset because the question of Malay students not doing well in their studies should not arise after four decades of independence.

He is obviously dissatisfied with the measures taken to overcome the problem, more so when the polemics focussed only on secondary and tertiary level, while ignoring the primary school level.

"If we do not know the performance at the primary school level, how are we to correct the secondary and tertiary level?" he asked.

He said education has several meanings. The first is to "enrich the mind" which must be done at the primary level because the young mind needs to be sharpened and nurtured.

The second meaning is "to train to use the mind" because without training, the mind becomes dull.

Education, he said, also means "to increase or to widen knowledge". This, he stressed, is a vital input after the first and second meaning because if not, learning for knowledge can become boring.

Education, he also said, must follow certain procedures, be visionary and meet to the needs of time.

IRRELEVANT EDUCATION

"What is the use of teaching students how to repair a 1935 car engine at a technical school? It is no longer relevant," he said.

Ghazali said education also required adequate equipment, not just a nice building complete with chairs, tables and a canteen, when the

knowledge imparted are out-dated and not in tune with the times.

He rejects outright the perception that Malay students are weak because of their genes. He also cannot accept the former colonial perception that the Malay students are lazy.

"I cannot accept these perceptions, until I can see the proof that the genes of Malays are weak.

"Before, the Malays were said to be lazy, now they are said to be weak in brain power so much so that there seems to be a new belief.... this fate of the Malays are similar to the "Tuskegee Syndrome", a damaging label given to the Blacks of the United States in between the two World Wars," he said.

He said his gut feeling is that the weakness of the Malay students has nothing to do with race or genes but with the former colonial policies which could still be felt, especially in the rural areas.

"Are the rural schools doing enough to enrich the mind, to train to use the mind and to increase or widen knowledge from the primary school level? If they are ignored at the primary level, how can they be different at the next secondary stage?" he asked.

EFFECTS OF SMART SCHOOLS

"What's more, if the good students are put in smart or elite schools...the ones left behind are just average students and when they are neglected, they are goners!" he said.

Ghazali also discussed the question in connection with the meaning of "Malay" in the context of the current debate by asking what is meant by "race" and "language".

He said while the question of "language" has been enshrined in the national constitution, "race" is still a very sensitive question.

He said he himself cannot answer the question of "who are the Malays" because the term used in the constitution is not satisfactory at all.

He proposed that an indepth study be conducted and that all races should support such a proposal so that any changes to the meaning of "Malays" in the constitution would be not be misunderstood later.

Ghazali also suggested that a special commission be set up as soon as possible to look thoroughly into the weaknesses of Malay students, without relying on assumptions.

NO EXTREME STATEMENTS

"Don't make any hasty statements or opinions or ex-post rationalisation. All opinions and statements must be forward-looking and visionary.

"This is not a question of race or only for the Malays. This is a national problem which covers all races in the urban or rural areas who share the same fate as the citizens of Malaysia," he said.

These are the pronouncements of Ghazali, a Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), a Fellow at the University of Wales, United Kingdom and a Fellow at INTAN, a former visiting professor at the National University of Singapore and an Adjunct Professor at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Although he is already 78 years old, it is obvious that Ghazali is still in tune with current developments, sensitive and conscious of the problems faced by his race, religion and nation.

-- BERNAMA

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