

16/08/2001

A single national education system needed

Harun Hashim

MERITOCRACY! This issue was first raised when Singapore was part of Malaysia in the early 1960s. Singapore's then Premier, Lee Kuan Yew, and his Peoples' Action Party preached it to the roof-tops with the slogan "Malaysian Malaysia".

Meritocracy then was clearly targeted against Article 153 of the Federal Constitution which inter alia makes provision for the reservation of quotas to Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak when allocating places for entry into public universities and colleges.

Now, as we celebrate, 44 years of independence, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed has called for meritocracy in the performance of academic studies of the Malays in an apparent despair that in spite of Article 153, Malay students have not taken full advantage of the special privileges accorded to them.

The lacklustre performance of Malay students in schools and universities is attributed to their falling by the wayside with lepak, bohsia, black metal music, drug abuse and general indiscipline. Actually these afflictions are not new. In the 1960s it was Teddy Boys with tight-fitting trousers and followed by long hairstyles in the 1970s.

Obviously, we have a social problem affecting the Malay community which calls for urgent attention. Hence Dr Mahathir's disappointment has been interpreted as a wake-up call to the Malays. There is a danger however, that we have become over concerned with the symptoms and ignoring the causes of the malady. The root cause must surely be the education system.

When we gained independence in 1957, there were four types of schools, namely, English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools. The elite schools were the English schools which had classes from Primary One right up to Standard Nine providing 11 years of primary and secondary education culminating in the Cambridge School Certificate examination which was recognised internationally for purposes of furthering tertiary education overseas.

The English school of yesteryear was racially mixed. Pupils studied and played together without any thought of race or religion. Promotion to an upper class was based purely on merit. Indeed the past leaders of this country and the majority of the present leaders are products of English schools which account for the remarkable racial and religious tolerance in the country.

After independence, the English and Malay schools were merged into national schools. The vernacular Chinese and Tamil schools were allowed to continue to function as in the past but with the expectation that they would dwindle in popularity as more and more parents preferred to admit their children to the multi-racial national schools.

Somewhere down the line this has not happened and polarisation of the races has taken root even at university campuses. This is certainly not the way to nurture a Bangsa Malaysia. The most effective way surely is to have a single national education system creating equal opportunities for all children in their formative years with an even playing field where meritocracy will assert itself.

Spoken English and discipline seems to be better in Chinese Schools than in the national schools. The Chinese schools must be doing something right with some Malay parents sending their children to Chinese schools. The national schools should adopt the system.

With Information Communication Technology, command of the English language is a must. But command of a language can only be acquired with regular use. English should therefore not only be taught for English language and literature lessons but also all science subjects. Malay language, literature, geography and history should be taught in Malay. All students in national schools should be required to take a third language which could be Mandarin, Tamil or Arabic but the choice should not be limited by race.

With a background of multi-racial national schools and a self ingrained merit system and discipline, there should be no problem with meritocracy when these students enter university.

Nowadays as both parents are at work all schools should devise a system of keeping the children at school all day for extra curricular activities, sports, remedial classes in addition to normal lessons.

The local universities have a continuous assessment system with assignments, project papers, tests and examinations during every semester. Students who cannot maintain standards are given a first warning letter and if they do not improve are dismissed.

The main function of a university education is to develop analytical skills and critical thinking. This methodology in the study of economics, political science, law and other professional courses should not be misunderstood for political leanings of any colour or even downright political partisanship.

It is the analytical and critical mind that is the mark of scholarship of the student and the academic. After all it is the expectation of the public that our universities produce graduates who have the necessary skills and wisdom to meet the challenges of globalisation. That is meritocracy!

(END)