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Malaysians must treat knowledge with respect

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INEQUALITY, actual or perceived, is the greatest motivating force in Malaysian politics. I must emphasise that I am talking about inequality rather than equality, precisely because equality is not found outside the world of mathematics.

When some Malaysians cry for equality, they are actually demanding equality with respect to a particular thing or other. Indeed, they simply want more. In short, it is superiority, rather than equality, that they are striving for.

Inequality was, and is, a basis for conflict in nations as diverse as Zimbabwe, the US, India and even us. Unequal education, like income, is a growing source of discontent among the Bumiputeras. This inequality, besides political Islam, is especially important for understanding the existence of militants among many of them.

One of the best ways to bring about national integration is via education but it has always been a contentious issue. Before Merdeka, education was, and even now is, to a large degree organised and recognised as a system which only fosters a centrifugal tendency.

When I was in school in the Fifties, I believe less than 20 per cent of Malaysians (Malays forming the smallest number) attended English-medium schools which fostered some racial contact and a kind of Malayaness.

Forty years on, despite a partial national education implementation, the situation has changed a little but leaves much to be desired. Many schools, though following the national curriculum, remain outside the national system in reality.

Three of the four Prime Ministers held the Education portfolio - Tun Razak, Datuk Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. All were charged with bridging the gap in the standard of education between urban and rural areas, and improving facilities in the kampung, new villages and estate schools.

Others who followed them were to accelerate the teaching of science, technology and to prepare Bumiputera students to compete on a level playing field. Have they succeeded? Yes and No.

According to many studies, it is confirmed beyond any reasonable doubt that both rural and urban Bumiputera students are doing badly in tertiary education. Experts say Bumiputera students want everything easy. Said Dr Syed Othman Al-Habshi of Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, " ... Bumiputera students don't like to struggle to be higher achievers", adding that " ... the situation is getting worse, and this is worrying". Malay students' poor English is troubling. Almost half of those in national primary schools failed a language test, while Malay boys at a rural school were unable to write a simple essay.

Other experts insist that all this began at primary and secondary level education. In the US, while a degree in higher education remains the passport to success in its economy, the national and many state governments are investing more in the public 'common' school system, that is equivalent to Standard One through Form Five in Malaysia.

American legislators and educationists now clearly understand the connection between students having a solid foundation in the basic courses in their early years and their success later as undergraduates and graduate students at the university level.

In addition, American educators and administrators in higher education

have been relating for many years that a significant portion of their financial resources in the form of facilities and teaching staff have been needed for remedial coursework for students at entry level, at the expense of higher quality university course offerings.

In the state of Oklahoma, for example, the Governor and state legislature have mandated higher minimum requirements in the fundamentals of maths, science, English and history in the curriculum of state-funded 'common' schools.

Along with increased funding in support of these goals, the Governor and the legislature have established increased requirements for testing and accountability. Educators and administrators at those schools not showing progress in meeting the higher standards must attend special courses to improve their teaching skills and knowledge of the subject matter. Should any school continue not to show improvement and progress, the entire faculty and staff will be removed and an entirely new team of educators, administrators and staff will be assigned to the school.

The US is a greater and older democracy than us. If the Americans can do all this, why can't we?

The Governor and legislature of Oklahoma, as well as other states in the US, see the critical role of the fundamentals in 'common' school education in their society and economy, and are committed and serious about instituting these reforms.

The PM had indicted the national education system and faulted errant (and politicised) teachers and academics. While the system seems acceptable to the other Malaysians, it has failed though it was allegedly designed to help the Bumiputeras by and large to deliver. Consequently, Bumiputeras are marginalised in tertiary education even with affirmative action.

This raises the question: is it the system which is to be blamed or the Bumiputeras' lack of commitment and rigour in acquiring knowledge?

The vitality of the other Malaysians, the Chinese and Indians in particular, always amazes me and has my admiration. I am happy for them.

They are despite, or perhaps because of, everything, blessed with tireless zeal and stamina and dedication. As if their motto is: 'Be not afraid of greatness' - Shakespeare, Twelfth Night.

Whatever one may say about British colonialism in Malaysia, it left behind one enduring influence - a good basis for education especially to train Malaysians (and Sarawakians and North Borneans before 1963) to achieve the goals of Whitehall in Malaya. It made many old generations of Malaysians Anglophiles or brown Mat Sallehs.

For the British and colonial administrators and educationists, the magic of the empire was the splendour and the ceremony, the Malay royalty, the aristocracy, the Chinese and Indian merchants who yearned for imperial honours and savoured imperial ritual.

Their world was antiquity and anachronism, tradition and honour, order and subordination, about glory and chivalry, processions and ceremony, plumed hats and parties. In short, about hierarchy, ostentation and ornamentalism.

The British governors and pro-Consuls made the local leaders and lesser Malaysians, through all this and the English language and loyalty training, the pillars that propped up the British Raj for a hundred years until our independence 44 years ago. We, more or less, sustain this anachronistic system but the result is less satisfactory.

Columnist Yunus Raiss asked what were the overriding educational aims of Malaya at independence? And if I may add, now?

For the first 10 years of Merdeka, everything looked well educationally. Then a succession of ultra-nationalist Education Ministers, who sent their

children overseas, decided to ditch English and promote Malay, the national language.

No one quarrelled then, or now, with Malay as the national and official language. Why did we exchange English as the medium of instruction for Malay? Why didn't we wait until we had enough books in English translated into Malay by learned people rather than, as Yunus said, by those who had good command of Malay and only a passable knowledge of English?

This is perhaps the primary cause of decline in the standard of education in the country. The other reason was and is the fact that education has been politicised, to our national detriment. Dr Mahathir had lambasted his over-zealous and super-nationalist predecessors and the ultra-nationalist educationists.

Of course, the education system, despite that has, in a way, delivered. But what types of Malaysians have we created? The chickens have come home to roost with a vengeance. We saw it in the last general election, in the civil service and even to some extent in the professional and corporate sectors. The worst is yet to come unless there is some drastic reform, and that quickly.

We should reconsider introducing a new education policy, a review of the present one, to produce and inculcate an ideal image of Malaysians to keep at bay the forces against modernity, nationalism and anything that smacks of a unified Malaysian nation that the highways and mass education (albeit being less and less marketable) have made possible.

Life has changed and is changing. Europeans, Japanese, Americans and Africans have introduced a more cosmopolitan note into the life of new Malaysia. We have become a part of the global village. We are coping and shall have to withstand the Western cultural assault, or is it the mullahs'?

The Mahathir government must decide before it is too late: his natural kindness should not temper his sense of duty. Education must provide Malaysians an understanding of the world and their place in it. Meritocracy is absolutely necessary to prepare Bumiputeras to face new challenges.

Great teachers a great nation make. Do we have good teachers, let alone remarkably superior ones? A great nation needs great thinkers and they need great teachers.

Bad teaching wastes a great deal of effort and spoils many lives which might have been full of energy to make our nation an even better place.

Samuel Johnson says, 'He that teaches us anything which we knew not before is undoubtedly to be revered as a Master.'

It is not too late, I suppose, to propagate that English is a peerless language, and helped in the training of our people to be loyal to the government and party which hauled down the Union Jack, and made us what we are today and what we shall be tomorrow.

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