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Some ways to make meritocracy more palatable to the Bumiputera

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WHEN talks of the Government applying meritocracy on Bumiputera students cropped up a couple of weeks ago, a Malay friend made a cynical remark:

"At least we can now look forward to a Malaysia and Singapore merger."

He was referring to a statement made by Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1996, that the republic may eventually reunite with Malaysia if the latter committed herself to meritocracy.

The remark from the Malay professional was not the least bit concerned about a potential Malaysia/Singapore merger but, rather, a sceptical reaction to the whole meritocracy idea being applied to university intake.

Yet, Lee's statement on the matter which irked most Malays from a large cross-section of Malaysian society and the present proposal of meritocracy intertwines in many ways than not.

When Lee said it, Singapore's Malay Muslims reacted strongly and some Umno leaders did not mince their words when criticising the Singapore statesman.

Their reactions helped convince the community at large on how important it was that meritocracy remains in Singapore, and never cross the Selat Tebrau.

In short, the idea of a meritocratic Malaysia sent numerous negative thoughts to many a Singaporean Malay Muslim.

Of course, Lee made the remark in 1996 when Malaysia and the rest of the region were riding on a powerful wave of economic prosperity.

Even if the Malay Muslims in Singapore were still lagging compared with the other races, the expansive economic cake at that time was enough to give the community a sense of success, false or otherwise.

As such, the rejection of Lee's idea was understandable as the Malaysian system of extending privileges and giving the Malays an edge over others had worked well.

Apart from that, Lee is not a favourite leader among Singapore's Malay Muslims as he is viewed as a "chauvinist" given the fact that Singapore is perceived to be very Chinese in all aspects of her existence.

On that ground alone, Malaysians, especially the Malays, felt strongly against changing the nation's policies when it has served the community's interest while not shortchanging their non-Malay counterparts.

However, the financial crisis the following year exposed a lot of fissures within the Malay community, apart from proving how vulnerable its economic standing was.

Compounding the matter was the division of the Malay political forces which became even more pronounced, causing much uncertainties over what was good for the community.

Then came the demand from the Chinese organisation Suqiu which, among others, pushed for equal treatment for all races - in effect, it was promoting meritocratic principles.

The Malay divide came to the fore.

In the past, the community would leave their political differences aside when dealing with threats to their privileges and special position.

But this time around, one side was prepared to support Suqiu just to "spite" the other.

The discomfort among the Malays was further aggravated when local newspapers, the New Straits Times included, highlighted the contents of a book written by a Singaporean Malay, Lily Zubaidah Rahim.

The book, *The Singapore Dilemma - The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, among others, pointed out how the community was left behind in meritocratic Singapore.

Along the way, the over zealous participation of Malay students in politics and their poor academic performance raised questions about the efficacy of the privileges and quota system.

It seemed that the future of Malays, especially the younger generation, hanged on the balance whether or not the privileges and quota system prevailed.

Finally, Dr Mahathir came up with the idea of applying meritocracy in education and said he believed that was probably the medicine, bitter as it may be, to jolt the Malay students from their slumber.

It did jolt the community and based on the many reactions, acceptance of the idea is definitely favourable.

However, his recent explanation that the meritocracy being proposed would be partial, selective and more of a test than a move to depart from existing policies, should provide some comfort to the agitated Malays.

While the debate on whether such a move was wise or otherwise will continue for a long time, there are certain aspects of the idea which may help improve the Malay lot and remove some of the negative perception about the nation's affirmative action.

Even if the Malay political leadership decides in the end not to apply meritocracy fully, it can at least ensure that it prevails within the community.

For example, surely scholarships should be given based on merit and it should be purely on academic excellence.

The negativity surrounding scholarship distribution arises when some of the Malay students receiving them did not use the funds for their tuition or other academic costs but rather to purchase worldly comforts.

It is quite nauseating to see students on scholarships buying cars, top-of-the-range handphones or attending parties in expensive restaurants or entertainment outlets.

Surely, if they can afford all of these, they don't deserve scholarships.

Apart from that, students from poor and rural backgrounds should be given priority when scholarships are handed out, and this is in spite of their poorer academic achievements.

In short, the principles of special rights and privileges accorded to the Bumiputera should be applied within the community itself and not on the nation as a whole, per se.

All these would definitely make privileges, quotas and special rights more palatable not only to the Malays, but to the rest of the nation.

That achieved, meritocratic principles will come eventually whether the Malays like it or not.

Then, Lee's dream of a Malaysia-Singapore reunification may still come true.

But it will definitely not be on his terms.