

**LANGUAGE LIMBO:** Female Malaysian students practise their English

are currently unemployed, and of this figure more than 90% are ethnic Malay. This is due, in large part, to their poor English-language skills at a time when the civil service has frozen recruitment because of the difficult economic climate and the private sector wants people with good English.

Moreover, many opt for degrees such as Islamic or Malay studies, which are not so marketable. This is partly because students are deterred by the fact that while lectures in science and economics courses are given in Bahasa, some 80% of their reference books are in English.

Highlighting the language problem, an English teacher at an elite Malaysian boarding school where 90% of the students are Malays, says: "The best are still reasonably good. But the majority are pretty bad in English."

#### KICK-STARTING CHANGE

Mahathir, anxious that Malaysia should not lose its competitive edge, has skilfully managed to kick-start change, starting with a directive from the Umno Supreme Council on May 10 that from next year science and maths should be taught at the primary level in English. They also agreed that English literature should be taught at primary schools. Once these teaching practices have been established at primary level, they can presumably be introduced at secondary level.

The ball had started rolling a week earlier, when Umno's Kubang Pasu division—which is headed by Mahathir—passed a resolution calling for more subjects to be taught in English. The premier then upped the ante by suggesting, "if the people want it," a reversion to the pre-1969 system. Newspaper polls among urban populations showed wide support for this, even among ethnic Malays.

Ultimately the Umno Supreme Council compromised. But even diluted change will upset powerful vested interests among the Malay intelligentsia and political world as any attempt to push English will be seen as a move to downgrade Bahasa. Indeed, the ailing opposition Keadilan, or National Justice Party, has jumped on the nationalistic bandwagon and attacked Mahathir's plans while the influential Malay Writers Association on May 29 condemned the move as "a future challenge to the national language."

Most teachers also probably oppose change that could affect their own livelihoods. Furthermore, educationists say it may be difficult to implement the plan as there simply are not enough teachers with adequate language skills to teach science and maths in English.

"It could result in a drop in standards in maths and science without raising the standards of English among students," warns Lim Kit Siang, chairman of the opposition Democratic Action Party.

But observers reckon Mahathir, now aged 77, is determined to push through change in the belief that his successor would not be strong enough to overcome Malay resistance. "I think he feels that if it isn't done now, it will never be done," says a Malay businessman close to government. ■

## MALAYSIA

# Bahasa Blues

*Bahasa has long been the language of instruction, but some think English should be brought back*

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By S. Jayasankaran/KUALA LUMPUR

**AS A YOUNG FIREBRAND** nationalist, Mahathir Mohamad was among those who campaigned vigorously in the 1960s for the indigenous *Bahasa* language to replace English as the medium of instruction for education in Malaysia. By the early 1990s, when he had been prime minister for several years, a more pragmatic Mahathir had clearly come to rue his earlier enthusiasm and realised that it could cost the country dearly. He is now trying—in the face of powerful opposition—to undo the damage before it is too late.

The movement to introduce Bahasa, or Malay, as the language of instruction had been led by influential sections of the politically dominant United Malays National Organization (Umno). They wanted both to eradicate vestiges of British colonial rule and to help the Malay community—the most populous in the country, but also the poorest and least successful. A law passed in 1969 established the principle, but it took another 13 years to fully implement Bahasa from primary through to higher education. Mahathir played a vital role in the process as education minister from 1974-78.

But over the past three decades, English has firmly emerged as the language of international trade and commerce in Asia. At the same time, the standard of English in Malaysia has plunged, and that could hurt its competitiveness given the country's investment and export-dependent economy.

Ironically, the introduction of Bahasa may have disadvantaged the very people it was supposed to help—the Malays, who form 60% of the population. According to government statistics released in April, some 44,000 university graduates