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Fate of truly united nation lies in our own hands

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A NATION consists of a race of people of common descent, history, language and culture. Such a nation is said to be homogeneous.

Over time, however, people of other races immigrate into the country in search of greener pastures or the country itself becomes part of a larger political entity resulting from conquest, the founding of an empire or in recent times the formation of a federation of States.

The consequence of such developments enables the free movement of people within the enlarged political entity and the homogeneous nation ceases to exist.

Malaysia consists of people of various ethnic origins, namely Malays, Chinese, Indians, orang asli and the several native tribes of Sabah and Sarawak.

Internationally, Malaysia is recognised as a nation and a member of the United Nations.

The question is whether we are a nation in spirit and substance.

Some progress has been made. When we travel abroad, we carry a Malaysian passport and we are proud to claim and be recognised as Malaysian whatever our ethnic origins may be.

Another step towards nation-building was to enshrine in the Constitution that the national and the language for official purposes shall be the Malay language. Indeed the Malay language has been the lingua franca of Malaysians long before Independence.

The Malay language has been made a compulsory subject in all schools and most young Malaysians are quite proficient in using the language.

But the mere compulsory teaching of Malay in schools has not been sufficient to achieve the objective of unifying the people as a nation. This is especially so when the Malay language is not the mother tongue of a large number of Malaysians or the first language of all Malaysians.

Strictly speaking we are not yet a nation with a common national language.

Domestically, Malaysians do not think and act as Malaysians but as separate ethnic groups. Indeed, most political parties draw their strength and support by being racially-based political parties.

The process of integration rather than assimilation in creating a Malaysian nation has been painfully slow and it is in danger of disintegrating.

Unlike other countries in Southeast Asia, we have not forced as a matter of national policy for non-Malays to adopt and use Malay names.

In any event it would not be practical to use the very limited Malay names like Awang, Sulong, Ngah and Bongsu! Most Malays use Arabic names because they are Muslims although in the Middle East such names are used by Muslims and Christians alike because Arabic is their national language.

A major cause of the slow nation-building process is said to be our education system of separate vernacular schools.

The national-school system was designed to unite all Malaysians. The continued existence of Chinese- and Tamil-medium schools is perceived to have contributed to the rising tide of racial polarisation in our society, made worse by the increasing number of Malays attending Sekolah Agama Rakyat.

We cannot and should not blame British colonial policy of divide and rule when it established the vernacular Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools.

We have been our own masters for more than 45 years but have perpetuated the system purely on racial lines.

Whatever we may think of the Americans and Australians nowadays, they have each created a nation out of a multiplicity of ethnic and multilanguage immigrants in their countries by providing English as the national language and a common education system.

We could have done the same from the very beginning when we achieved Independence.

It is most encouraging therefore that a special committee has been established under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to review our education system.

The primary object of our education system should be the creation of a truly Malaysian nation.

The ideal is a single-school system but the reality is that this is not politically correct. The alternative is to improve the national school as the first choice school for the majority of students.

The students in national schools should be multi-racial and multi-religious, thereby providing equal opportunity in education to all without regard to race, gender or religion.

The medium of instruction should be in Malay for Malay language and literature, history, geography and other arts subjects; English for English language and literature, mathematics and science; and a third compulsory elective language like Arabic, Mandarin, Tamil or any other language.

Admission to the elective language classes should not be according to race or religion.

The proposal to close down Sekolah Agama Rakyat is consistent with the concept of a national school system which already provides Islamic religious education to Muslim students.

Malaysia is acknowledged as the model state for inter racial harmony. May it remain so as a nation for ever.