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Integration: Is unity club the answer?

reports on "Special report - (Unity clubs in universities)" by
"THIRTY years ago," NST reader Nalza Mohamad writes, "my uncle was involved in an accident near Nibong Tebal.

"The car he was driving skidded and hit a tree.

"Villagers came out to see what caused the noise. It was said then that they looked at my uncle and aunt who were `fair' skinned compared to other Malays, (and didn't help).

"I assumed the animosity arising from the May 13 incident somewhat influenced these folk. The car caught fire and my uncle and aunt perished in that tragedy."

Stories like this abound, not just in the near-post-May 13 era. Today, a typical advice for a person driving through a racially-exclusive kampung is, "if you accidentally knock someone down, drive off immediately and make a police report later. Otherwise, the villagers will beat you to death".

It's hard to believe that Malaysia today could be so anarchic, but if racial mistrust leading to advice like this still exists, then perhaps we haven't moved far from the days of May 13, 1969, even as new generations grow up knowing not what had happened then.

Small wonder then, that there is concern that our universities - our mahligai ilmu (cathedrals of enlightenment), the nurseries of future leadership - are cultivating a polarised citizenry.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for the setting up of unity clubs in universities indicates that whatever our universities have been doing these past 20, 30, 40 years, has failed.

In reality though, have our universities failed us or are we looking too myopically at the issue?

The Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVC) of Universiti Putra Malaysia (Associate Professor Dr Idris Abdol), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (Professor Datuk Dr Mohamed Mansor Abdullah), Universiti Sains Malaysia (Associate Professor Datuk Dr Jamaludin Mohaiadin) and Universiti Utara Malaysia (Associate Professor Dr Mohamed Mustafa Ishak) were asked about their universities' efforts towards promoting racial integration among students.

All the DVCs lamented that they were unfairly saddled with the responsibility of restructuring individuals who, at the age of 18-plus, are set in their ways.

UUM's Mustafa felt that to wait until the university level was too late.

"We are asked to perfect their English, change their racial patterns - and all in three years," he said.

The DVCs said that the students who come to the universities are the product of the education system.

All the educators interviewed had undergone English-medium education, which they believe, bound them together.

"Frankly now, which generation is more tolerant - our generation or the present generation?" USM student affairs development division deputy registrar Siti Zubaidah Abdul Hamid asked.

Mansor felt that the problem started with the establishment of the national school. Though fundamentally a good idea in itself, he believed that the addition of vernacular schools defeated the purpose of the national school.

"Where's the sense in having a national school when the children are all

separated? They should all sit in the same class, learn in the same language," said Mansor.

"For as long as we have vernacular schools, chauvinism will exist."

UUM's Mustafa said that with little or no initial exposure to multi-racialism, these students, most from non-urban areas, could not be expected to mix with people from other races when they got to university.

"Some of them have never even had a Chinese or Indian friend at primary or secondary school, and you expect them to live together at uni versity?"

Integration needed to be developed from young, said Idris.

An alumnus of the Royal Military College (RMC) in the 1960s, Idris said that sharing every aspect of life with people from all races, cultures, and religions from a very early age had made him and his peers open to multiculturalism.

Conversely, those from single-race boarding schools had difficulty living with other races.

Lily (not her real name), a Chinese student at a government preparatory college where 90 per cent of students are Bumiputera, said that Malay students who came from these boarding schools were less open-minded about other races.

Mustafa said that looking at universities as the locus for racial po-larisation was missing the whole point of racial integration.

"Life at university is actually a reflection of the wider world out there. University is a microcosm of society," he said.

"Is there genuine integration out-side the campus? If there is, then only can we ask why university is different. Why should we be so concerned about universities? We should be more concerned about society at large. We should promote integration all the time, and not just when a portion of youth get to university."

Siti agreed, pointing to examples of housing estates, where people of the same race flock together by choosing to buy houses on the same street.

Dr Mahathir had called for the university leadership to lead by example. And indeed, they must be doing so, since, as UTM and USM admit, their staff are nearly 100 per cent Malay.

In a way, too, racial segregation is mirrored in our political party system, the DVCs said. For as long as the elders chose to be separate, they really cannot blame the young for choosing to live separately, too.

It's a chicken-and-egg argument: are universities polarised because society is polarised, or is society polarised because universities are polarised?

In an ironic twist, Siti said that instead of racially integrating students, the greatest contribution of universities was in depolarising them.

"If there were racial integration from young, then all universities have to do is enhance it," said Idris, who believes that if there were a political will to achieve integration from an early stage, then the issue of racial integration in universities need not arise.

"Integration is a shared responsibility between the home, school, university, society - all should be mutually supportive," said Mansor.

The only other option, said Mustafa, was for universities to create a pseudo-environment where everything was hunky-dory for the three years that an undergraduate is there. This simply could not be done as universities do not exist in a vacuum from society.

The issue then is, how much does Malaysia want racial integration to happen? As an exercise in social engineering, how instituted should racial integration be?

When push comes to shove and when efforts at university-endorsed

integration falters, universities themselves refuse to force their students to act against their beliefs.

But then again, questioned Jamaludin, do you have to live together to be united?

Just how much individuality and time-apart should we have? Where do we draw the line between being different and being polarised?

Inti College vice-president of administrative affairs, Dr Koo Wee Kor, asked whether racial unity can be considered to be achieved only when a single identity - an authentic mix of characteristics from each race - was adopted by all, or could it be likened to bubur caca, where races mixed well but retained their distinctiveness?

Ultimately, this nation itself must know what it means by "racially integrated".

Would integration be achieved through a culture of no cultures - like the blandness of secular urban living, for instance? Or, would integration be achieved through the assimilation of the minority into the majority - a subsumption of otherness.

There is a tale, which highlights society's concept of integration, of an American immigration officer, who, on visiting an Italian immigrant family at their home, comes out with the observation: "Still eating spaghetti. Not integrated."

Lily said that in her college, the rules are tailored for the culture and values of one race. Whilst this is a democratic acknowledgement of the majority's needs, it also means that the minority will always have to conform to the majority.

This works well for some things, but maybe not for integration. If a Hindu student has to do without a figurine of his deity because of his Muslim roommate's sensitivities, where stands his rights to religious practice? Where goes his otherness?

In Mustafa's opinion, tolerance is about one party making a compromise.

But is racial integration a matter of just tolerance or should it be more of understanding?

UTM's Mansor said people should be taught the cultures of various races and religions. In his opinion, language is most important in crossing the chasms that race presents.

"If a Malay could speak some Mandarin, then a Chinese person would probably feel friendlier towards him, because the Malay is making an effort to know that person's culture or language," Mansor said.

But beyond language, there also needs to be an understanding of religion, and this, perhaps, may not be so easy.

As Mustafa put it, eventually, everything ends in religion. Mixed marriages in Malaysia - a wonderful aspect of integration - cannot take place without the issue of religion, especially where one partner is Muslim, and the other is required to convert.

Similarly, because other religions other than Islam are prohibited from proselytising Muslims, the teaching of the otherness of religions has been strictly confined to the historical and theoretical, often at dull lectures.

How, then, can a Muslim truly learn about the religions of his friends of other faiths, if, as exemplified by student notices, religious meetings and discussions have to come with the proviso: Untuk pelajar-pelajar bukan Islam sahaja (For non-Muslim students only).

Integration, Mustafa said, could not be measured by anything quantifiable since it is an emotional and psychological thing. It is a feeling of oneness - which may only be fostered and measured over time - maybe even one generation.

It is only when people really feel comfortable in taking part in events

that involve other races that you could say that integration has been achieved.

"Integration cannot be wished with a wave of a magic wand," he said.