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Identity of nation should be defined by majority community

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IF Umno Youth continues to rebuke MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik over the issue of the 10 per cent quota for Bumiputeras in private colleges, an inter-party conflict is in store.

That would not be a nice thought for Dr Ling, who is still embroiled in an intra-party battle whose tensions have only just simmered down.

It took a peace plan from Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to lessen the vitriol between the feuding MCA factions a.k.a Team A and Team B.

The joke going around now is that Dr Mahathir will have to come up with another peace plan to put a damper on the fused Umno Youth/MCA power keg.

It may not come to that, but full-scale debates on meritocracy, the 10 per cent quota and promoting English over Bahasa Malaysia are already on the score-card.

These issues are expected to be taken up at the 15th Umno general assembly, which starts on June 18.

This is just as well, as these issues are not only matters close to the hearts of Malays in the country but the *raison d'etre* of Umno itself.

It is not an overstatement to say that Umno was set up on these very issues, and has been relevant to the Malays because of its participation in them.

Umno has been in the forefront of defending, jealously guarding and at times intimidatingly insisting that Malay privileges and rights, the Malay language and other affirmative action for the community are not to be questioned.

Some of these privileges or rights are entrenched in the Constitution. Others were re-affirmed or formulated under the New Economic Policy in 1970.

Now, top Umno leaders in the Government are promoting meritocracy and advocating a 10 per cent quota for non-Malays in the previously Bumiputeras-only Mara Junior Science College and the re-introduction of English in schools.

Malays who think these leaders are betraying the party and the community at large are not to be blamed for reaching such a conclusion.

After all, it was these Umno leaders themselves who rallied the Malays to stand up to defend their rights and privileges.

That said, the next question is: how did the Malays respond to the calls by Umno leaders to stand up to defend these privileges?

A good example would be the conflict two years ago between Umno and Suqiu, the Chinese organisation that made several demands, in effect, questioning aspects of Malay rights and privileges.

When Umno stood up to oppose Suqiu then, none of the other Malay-based political parties came forward in support.

Except for a few non-governmental organisations regarded as close to Umno, other Malay NGOs, intelligentsia and even student movements vocal during the reformasi period, spoke up against Suqiu.

Pas and Parti Keadilan Nasional, directly or otherwise, supported Suqiu. It was during the same period that Umno proposed Malay unity talks with Pas and Keadilan. But Pas wanted a debate on national unity while Keadilan snubbed the invitation, insisting it was a multi-racial party.

The intention of the Malay unity talks was to determine what the community wanted, and the policies needed to ensure the survival of the

race in a very competitive world.

But none of the Malay-based parties or movements were interested. They either viewed it as a move to promote Umno, or did not believe in the need to defend the privileges.

Either way, Umno was left to work things out on its own.

Today, its leaders have decided that meritocracy must be introduced, English be re-emphasised and some Malay institutions be opened to non-Malays.

Meritocracy is among the principles outlined by Pas in its broad features of what an Islamic State should be. As such, Umno has an opposition if it continues to undermine meritocracy. The re-emphasis of English seems to have drawn some flak, including from certain segments of the Malay intelligentsia.

The question is, from what position are these intellectuals speaking?

Most are those who have become part of the elite, who may find promoting the Malay language a novelty under the guise of Malay nationalism. It is fine for those who have attained such a level of proficiency, some of whom have children or grandchildren unable to speak Malay well.

Then, those against emphasising English are already "there".

Of course, those not "there" have also spoken out against the English issue, but more out of insecurity than anything else.

Indeed, Bahasa Malaysia should be the thrust of nation-building, but acquiring proficiency in another language does not dilute one's nationalism.

It is against this backdrop that some Umno leaders are trying to slowly "dismantle" some of the taboo privileges and rights that were the impetus of the nation's independence.

Like it or not, such efforts of social engineering in a plural society, aimed at creating a cohesive nation, need to be borne by the majority Malays.

As proven in other multi-racial countries, the United States included, the identity of the nation must be moulded on the majority race. The US and other Western nations are definitely Anglo-Saxon based.

African-Americans only attained their civil rights in the late 1960s after President Lyndon B. Johnson and the majority whites agreed, although only after extensive protests by the minority.

Similarly, Malaysia has definitely been moulded around the Malays. As such, changes to race-based policies can only be pursued if the Malays agree and take the lead in pushing for them.

This is what is happening now. Malays who are unhappy about it should speak up now or forever hold their peace. In fact, they should have spoken earlier, during the Suqiu issue. It does look like it is almost too late now. For the wheel of the Malay fate has turned.

* This is the first of a series of articles in the run-up to the 15th Umno general assembly

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