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Just give us a good education

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LET me use George Orwell's example and begin this column with an arresting generalisation: Malaysian education is a mess. There is little common ground between the national, vernacular and the religious schools; each of whose vested interests resists any meaningful convergence of the system as anathema.

Obviously, the present situation is untenable, the more so given the utmost importance of education for the future of the country - not just to equip Malaysians with the knowledge to prosper in a globalised economy but with the living skills to succeed in a multi-racial society.

The national priority of education is not something that the country has just woken up to. The education portfolio has been a necessary stepping stone for our prime ministers (with the exception, of course, of our first, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra). It has been a tacit requirement in Umno and in the Government that they must first be able to run the country's fretful education system before they take on the rigours of running the country.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was Education Minister, in 1974, and so have been his anointed successors Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. They continue a long tradition of managing Malaysia's future on the basis of a first-hand acquaintance with the means to achieve it.

Now, however, education has gone all the way up the hierarchy of national interest. The Prime Minister himself is heading the effort at empirical reform, after decades in which politics had been allowed to do more harm than good.

The aims of national education have been challenged, corrupted and diverted by radicals and reactionaries with their own narrow agendas. Politics was what sustained the divergence between national and vernacular schools, as evidenced by the controversy over the use of English in Science and Mathematics. If that wasn't bad enough, the separation of interests between national and religious schools is probably worse.

Perhaps, religious schools, especially sekolah agama rakyat (independent/private schools) have a longer history of sectarian autonomy than their vernacular counterparts. Their bunker mentality is more deeply rooted, more knee-jerk and less disposed to reasoned argument, like the Opposition which champions them and criticises the Government for suspending aid to the schools.

The Opposition and these schools have subverted religious education to the point of ridicule and produce little more than half-baked seminarians with no other option than to perpetuate the obscurantism of their beliefs. They teach religious monomania, hate and the false promise of an invented Islamic utopia. This is obvious even to many steadfast and otherwise right-thinking supporters. But the politics of sustaining such schools has been confused with an unthinking insistence on condoning whatever they might teach.

How this circling of the wagons came about is a long story, going back before Independence to a time of subjugation in which the Malays were socially and economically structured and kept apart in order to serve the colonial masters.

The madrasah and pondok that preceded present-day sekolah agama rakyat were for the vast majority of Malays the only available avenue for an

elementary education. Excluded from the elitist colonial schools by backwardness, superstition and prejudice (they were thought to be Christian), nearly all Malay children went to the sekolah agama if they went to school at all.

Even then, they were few and far between. The British colonial government wasn't interested in educating the Malay masses except for the select few it could induct into the clerical and ruling classes of the administration.

I attended a religious school for a term before going into a Malay school in 1947. In Kampung Bandar, Machang, in Kelantan where I was born, there was no school before 1950. In next door Kampung Kemubu, there was a fee-paying religious school called Madrasah Saadatul Qura, which is no longer in existence. The nearest government school was in Pangkal Kalong near Kok Lanas, about seven miles from my kampung.

In rural Kelantan, community-based religious instruction in the form of the madrasah and pondok was, and still is, an institution. Some of the village schools were impoverished structures where tok guru and ustaz taught Malay children the rudiments of being a Muslim and a Malay - clearly in that order.

Some years after Independence, religious schools were funded and expanded by the Government and State religious authorities. Not a few remain good schools to this day. The lesser schools also remained and were subsidised by the Government, not just for their value to the community in the remoter areas, but because better-equipped government schools were still on their way to being built. (Pondok were exclusively private and tok guru worth their salt almost always rejected government subsidies then and now.)

This laissez faire religious education, tolerated while the national education system grew apace by a Government that trusted in its noble intentions, was exploited by Islamic radicals in the 1980s. Sekolah agama rakyat kept on getting government funding long after they should have been obsolete.

In the 45 years since Independence, more than a dozen schools - including a polytechnic and a fully residential Chinese school - have been established in and around Kampung Bandar, Pulai Chondong and Kok Lanas.

In the 41 years from 1909 that the British governed Kelantan, only one school was built.

Today, there is no need for the deprived rural communities to sustain their own grossly inferior private schools when there is a betterendowed government school nearby - unless they have been put up to it by the extremists among them, which is unfortunately mainly the case.

It is indeed Pas and its fellow radicals - for whom the sekolah agama rakyat are a spawning ground, a blatantly opportunistic means to their own political ends - who are most protective of the sekolah agama rakyat. The Government cannot continue supporting renegade schools that offer no benefit to society other than to swell the Opposition's ranks.

Like the Taliban in Afghanistan, if Pas and its partners in religious deviationism want to ruin the futures of young children in their strongholds, they should do so with their own resources. The Government must not abet in the production of thousands of clerical graduates who will end up jobless. Such schools must be closed if they endanger national security.

Government schools already provide more than sufficient religious instruction. Indeed, it is the gradual Islamisation of the national school system since the 1980s, rather than the preponderance of Bahasa Malaysia as the ultimate language of instruction, that has exacerbated the schism with vernacular schools.

The Government must reconvert the present national schools into national schools in the real sense of the word to regain the confidence of the Malays and non-Malays, which was the case prior to their takeover by the Islamists. They must not be turned into another version of an Islamic institution, of which there is already a surfeit.

To me, education is simple. Now, more than before, it should clearly cultivate the triple objective: education for living, learning to make a living and to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.

As John F. Kennedy said: "A child miseducated is a child lost." We have seen it happening to our young during the last two decades, the last couple of years especially.

It is sad to admit but own up we must, that Malaysian education is a mess of conflicting interests and competing aims. The national agenda has suffered as a result.

The politics of education which preaches racial or religious exclusion has no place in a multi-racial Malaysian society. We must stop the rot now or forever keep our peace.