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Languages of mistrust

IT does look like a warped sense of insecurity sometimes. The countless reassurances from national policy-makers appear to have done little to wipe away the fear and unease of a section of the Malaysian community over the perceived future of Chinese schools. Given the psyche and make-up of the country's population, such an issue always has that cheeky tendency to flare up into something worse.

Regrettably, this misapprehension rears its ugly head every now and then, forcing on each occasion another round of rebuttals on the part of the Government. It seems to be passing this way again, sadly but predictably with the Ketari by-election around the corner. There may be instigators and opportunists at work here, but the fact that feathers can be ruffled by this sort of thing 45 years after Merdeka says much about the level of mistrust that still remains to muddy national objectives. Niggling suspicions still break the surface in spite of guarantees in the Constitution and education policy on the recognition of schools teaching in the Chinese, Tamil or Arabic language.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in a meeting with editors of Chinese newspapers earlier this week, had to respond to these jumpy vernacular educationists by repeating the Government's stand for the umpteenth time. To say that the fears are unfounded, however, is to put it too simply. It is the mindset that must change. For instance, while Chinese schools continue to exist, they should not resist measures at getting schoolchildren of the various races to mix with one another. National unity can hardly be reinforced by fencing off separate language streams. If their curricula cannot be more convergent, isn't it desirable at least to have children interact at the fringes of their education? This lies at the core of the government's Vision School concept which, because of continuing agitation by vested interests, remains misunderstood and therefore loathed by some.

The relocation of schools, especially Chinese ones, is often viewed with thoughtless hostility. In one case, even when an overwhelming majority of parents and teachers had agreed to the good reasons for a move, a handful remains encamped in protest. Such theatrical demonstrations can be tolerated in a democracy. But they are harder to forgive should they seek to turn their quibbles into a politically motivated condemnation of the Government.

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