

08/11/2002

Roll call!

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ALL together now. Army style.

Left, left, left, right, left. Left, left, left, right, left ...

So, are you ready to fall in line? Are you prepared to make that roll call at the break of dawn and assemble in the morning dew? Are you geared up to be recruited and lend three months of your life to the national service?

On Thursday last week, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak announced Malaysian youths will soon be required to join the national service which includes military training. Ours will be a "modified" version of the one implemented in Singapore.

Proposed by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the programme is aimed at inculcating the spirit of patriotism and character-building in the young, and promoting racial integration.

The participation will be made compulsory to all school leavers i.e., those who have completed the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia and are waiting for their examination results.

A special committee has already been set up to study the matter.

Are those moans and groans we hear?

Don't be too upset. From what we've gathered, the proposed national service offers many a good thing. You'd be surprised at how much you can benefit from it!

In Thailand, where a similar national service programme has been implemented (selection through balloting), many employers actually favour candidates who have received military training over others who haven't.

"When screening job applicants, most employers ask for proof of participation in the national service," said Pakavat Chaisatit, 18, from Bangkok.

Pakavat added that in Thailand, those who have reached 21, would gather at district offices all over the country each year to draw a ticket which determines whether they have been chosen for the two-year stint.

"A black card means you are excused from joining the military service. A red card means enlistment in the armed forces," he said, adding that young Buddhist monks are exempted from this exercise.

German teenager Dominik van Kranenbrock, 19, said the compulsory national service in his country has helped impart new skills to young people and provide a base for a career.

Under the programme, school leavers have a choice of applying for military training or social/community programmes. The programmes run for nine months and 10 months respectively.

"Those who opt for military training can also choose to do their degrees while serving the army. What's good about this is that upon graduation, you will be offered jobs within the military departments," he said.

German youngsters are required to undergo a medical check-up upon completion of their Abitur exam, the equivalent of Britain's A-levels. Only after they have been certified fit can they enrol in either programme.

Van Kranenbrock has opted to enrol himself in the community service sector, where he will be provided with a car to help ferry old and needy people in the nearby villages, and assist them with their daily chores.

"This would include running errands, washing their clothes, buying groceries, cleaning their houses and making sure they get their medication

among other things," he said, adding that he is required to write a daily report for his supervisor.

"I chose the social service over the army because I like to help people. This way, I can also help build my self-confidence," said the teenager who comes from a village called Herzogenaurach in the southeast of Germany.

He will also get free accommodation and a daily allowance of between Euro 7-9 (RM26.60 and RM34.20) for food and clothing.

Other areas of social service include working in hospitals and other welfare and health organisations such as the Red Cross.

Van Kranenbrock also said that German youngsters are required to complete their preferred disciplines before they reach 25, "so you have a choice of either completing your degree first or doing it later."

Similarly, Italy offers charity work as an alternative to military life.

Captain Adriano Sarto of the Italian Navy and Defence Attache at the Embassy of the Republic of Italy in Kuala Lumpur said, currently, youngsters between 18 and 20 can choose between the 10-month national military service and the one-year civilian service.

However, by 2007, the compulsory military service will be abolished, giving way to voluntary recruitment.

"Many feel that this mandatory service is a waste of time and money because we cannot train them or achieve much in such a short time frame," he said.

Unlike countries like Singapore, Greece, Korea, Iran, Turkey and Mexico which offer only uniformed forces, Germany and Italy provide an alternative.

In Singapore, where its compulsory national service has been implemented for the last 35 years, recruits wake up at 5.30am every morning.

"We start with five basic exercises including running. After breakfast, we have our practical and theoretical classes in the various units we have been assigned to," said Ziad Omar, 22, who is attached to the infantry unit in the army.

Joining the army is only compulsory for male Singaporeans aged 18 and above. Those who complete high school are required to serve for two years while those who opt to continue with their studies after school will have to sign up for two and a half years upon graduation.

Apart from the army, other uniformed bodies that one can enrol in are the navy, police and civil defence. Those who are not fit to undergo the rigorous training can opt for administrative work.

"My parents said that I have changed for the better since joining the army. I used to be a very shy person but now my social skills have improved immensely. The training has helped boost my confidence."

At the army camp, Ziad shares his bunker with those from other races. "We treat each other like brothers because we go through a lot of things together, good times and bad".

"Being with the army has taught me to have trust in others, regardless of their background, race or religion. On my part, I, too, would put my life on the line for them," he said.

"Joining the army also teaches me to love my country more than I ever have. We learn to respect the national flag every morning and evening," he said.

Patriotism is also the main focus of the programme in South Korea.

Korean reporter Nam-Koong, 27, explains: "We start with either koong ik gun moo (social service) or gun bok moo (military training) on reaching 18, for a maximum period of 26 months.

"After this, we have to undergo a military refresher course for 40 hours every year for seven years. Pursuant to this there is a 40-hour-a-year patriotism course which each citizen is supposed to complete until he

reaches 40," he said.

Penalty for those who try to escape the call of duty? A jail sentence for the duration of the national service, which lasts between six and 26 months!

In other countries too, there is a penalty for running away from serving your country.

"In Mexico, your right to vote may be denied and you won't get an international passport if you escape from serving your country. You may also find it difficult to get any job in the country," said a twentysomething Mexican, Jorge Eduardo.

In some countries, those who have been granted permanent resident status are also required to serve. Otherwise, it may be withdrawn!

Stiff penalties, which are yet to be announced, also await those who ignore call-ups when the compulsory national service is implemented in the country.

But don't worry if you are planning to pursue your studies, our Government has ensured all that the service will not disrupt the youths' tertiary education and employment plans.

And since our "modified" national service will not focus solely on military training, young women will also be required to participate.

Yes, we are talking about 450,194 youngsters (based on the number of SPM leavers) who will be eligible for the service every year, of whom 226,312 are male and 223,882 female.

It has been suggested that the programme could be implemented in stages, through various State-level Government agencies such as the Education Ministry and the Youth and Sports Ministry.

Now, stop your whining or do 50 push-ups, private!