

13/06/2002

Still a thorny issue

Chok Suat Ling

THE controversy surrounding the merit-based public university intake this year was just about to lose steam and its earlier frenzied momentum when a new announcement stirred up public emotion all over again.

Another round of debate has started, and the situation looks set to remain so for some time to come - ironic for the announcement was meant to put to rest all murmurs of discontent concerning the practice of meritocracy in the area of higher education.

The spark that re-ignited the issue was the Prime Minister's statement that a 10 per cent quota will be allocated to non-Bumiputeras for matriculation courses in public universities. The same will apply for Mara Junior Science Colleges or Maktab Rendah Sains Mara (MRSM).

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the move was aimed at fostering racial integration, and with it national unity.

The opening up of institutions traditionally and normally occupied only by Bumiputeras is also viewed by many as a step towards the practice of "true meritocracy" in higher education. It was calculated to quell the dissatisfaction expressed by certain quarters that the public university intake this year was unfair as different pre-university qualifications were used to determine entry. This practice, claim its critics, favoured matriculation students as their programme is easier compared to "the hardest examination in the world", the unfortunate label accorded to the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia. The new ruling was meant to help iron out existing creases in the implementation of meritocracy, but as in any new, bold move in whatever direction, there are those who will inevitably feel threatened.

Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein has retaliated by asking private higher education institutions to allocate a 10 per cent quota for Bumiputera students. This, he argued, was necessary to balance the 10 per cent allocated to non-Bumiputera students at MRSM and matriculation programmes. Academics, politicians and other concerned parties have also spoken out against the move which they claim erodes Bumiputera rights. They also say it will not help make any significant inroads in fostering racial integration as 10 per cent is too negligible a number to make a discernible difference.

On the other side are those who feel there is no justifiable reason for anyone to feel threatened, nor is there a need to create a quota system at private education institutions to make up for the 10 per cent that has been taken away.

Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik was bewildered by the suggestion for a quota to be created at private educational institutions. The MCA president asked: "What is the point of creating a quota when it is unlikely to be filled? The Government has given Bumiputera students ample opportunities."

Hishammuddin has called Dr Ling Liong Sik for his statement, and accused him of attempting to foil efforts at fostering racial integration.

Coming from the head of a political movement duty bound to champion the rights of Malays, his statement is not unexpected. However, many find the need for a 10 per cent Bumiputera quota at private institutions puzzling, if not ridiculous.

For one, these institutions cater to demand and accept students as long as they have the required qualifications and money, irregardless of race or even citizenship.

As Dr Ling said, there is no problem allocating even 30 or 40 per cent for Bumiputera students if that many had applied for places. But the problem now is not many are applying, for a variety of reasons.

Deputy Education Minister Datuk Aziz Shamsuddin had explained the issue at length, using the same argument - it is not that the private colleges want to deny Bumiputera students the places, it is just that there is no demand.

In fact, allocating a 10 per cent quota for Bumiputeras might be self-defeating in the long run, when more of them start applying for places at private education institutions. This situation is likely. The balance and distribution of Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera at public and private educational institutions is unlikely to remain the way it is forever, especially now with meritocracy and changing economic realities. The 10 per cent allocated might then be too small and many Bumiputera students will find themselves denied places unless there is another policy change. The existing situation, which allows market forces to govern intake, makes the most sense at this point in time.

But considering that emotion has already come into the picture, it will be unrealistic to expect logic and reason to prevail.

* The writer can be contacted at sling@nstp.com.my

(END)