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## Stopping the mind-snatchers

THE view is better at the top of the hill. For a generation, addressing the issue of Malaysian education seems to have blundered about in a fog of conflicting perceptions and imperatives. The afflictions of education have been touted as deterioration - of standards, proficiencies, and lately of inter-racial relations. Politics jumps into the fray in a huge way, with every party held ransom, to greater or lesser degree, to the most parochial of its constituents.

This has come to be seen as a sign of the centre not holding; or, alternatively, of the disparate constituents of Malaysia developing generational momentums of their own. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad observed last week that this allows Malaysia the benefit of not needing to pursue "assimilation" as a means to national identity - another hearty credit to unity in diversity. But what of racial polarisation in our schools?

In the exclusive interview published in this newspaper yesterday, Dr Mahathir's peculiar clarity of vision (with or without his spectacles) once again illuminated the issue. Malaysian education has suffered not from decay and decline, but infiltration. Rather, it was the usurpation of the schools by the parvenu ideologues and theocracies of the past generation that fragmented the national education system. In the process, non-Muslims have shied away from increasingly "Islamised" national schools, while Muslims were lured, coerced or frankly shamed into out-right "religious" schools, leaving the national education policy stranded high and dry on the horns of not only Malay but Chinese, Indian and religious dilemmas.

As a result: no more multi-racial schools producing a-racial pupils; no more lifelong cross-cultural friendships rooted in childhood; no multi-hued playgrounds - indeed, no more play. Children are bundled up and away, cloistered in their mother tongues or sequestered in old-time religion, and taught from the outset to measure themselves by what others are not.

Hence the present imperative to wrest education back from the chauvinists and fanatics, who by their very nature have much more use for ignorance than enlightenment. Of the handful of policies Dr Mahathir most dearly wishes to see pursued after his retirement in less than a year, returning Malaysian education to Malaysia must be Job One.