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A real lack of political skill

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POLITICIANS, many believe, could sell ice to an Eskimo. It may be an exaggeration, but they are considered masters of the art of persuasion. These skills, however, seem to have eluded the leaders of some of the Barisan Nasional components.

Maybe it is lack of interest or commitment, but the way some of these leaders are going about the issue of Mathematics and Science in English in schools from next year is pathetic, to say the least.

They seem to be completely in the thrall of groups that are both insular and racially chauvinistic.

Actually, the introduction of English in Mathematics and Science was preceded by some policies that jolted the Malays out of their comfort zone.

First came the notion of meritocracy which in effect takes away the privilege of placement for Malays and Bumiputeras in public universities.

Then, Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad went to the party's general assembly in June to push the community into accepting the teaching of the two subjects in English instead of Bahasa Melayu.

At the same time, he took the opportunity to push the Malays into consideration of the fact that their crutches in terms of privileges and quotas may be taken away sooner rather than later.

He also wanted the Mara Junior Science Colleges (MRSM) to revive a dormant policy and start filling up 10 per cent of their classes with non-Malays.

A Malay intellectual pointed out: "All these should be viewed favourably by the non-Malays.

"If, after this while, they claim they have been treated like second-class citizens, the Malay leadership are taking firm and sure steps to change that even at the expense of losing their popularity with their own community.

"As such, I can't understand the opposition to the use of English in those subjects. It is not like the leaders want Bahasa Melayu to be imposed on them over Mandarin."

What she said makes sense.

After all, the privileges, quotas and status of Bahasa Melayu are prescribed in the Constitution and were re-affirmed by the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Despite initial protests from certain segments of Malays, seized upon by Pas as an opportunity to win votes, Umno went ahead to push for these changes.

Today, it can be said most Malay opinion makers have accepted the changes, be it the promotion of English, meritocracy or the phasing out of privileges and quotas.

Then came the question whether English for the two subjects would be used in vernacular schools. In fact, the question should not have arisen in the first place.

While vernacular schools can pursue their own course, they have to follow the national syllabus and education policies.

However, the question was asked and the Government responded by saying that the policy was applicable to all.

Here lies the difference between Malaysia and its closest neighbours - Thailand and Indonesia. Both nations from the start emphasised a single

identity for their citizens.

Indonesian Chinese and their schools suffered after the downfall of Sukarno, and in the 1970s had to drop even their Chinese names.

It was only three decades later, after Suharto's downfall, that Indonesian Chinese got the opportunity to hold their cultural events openly and allow their Chinese identity to re-emerge.

In Thailand, similar policies were in force for the Malay Muslims in the south. Many of them, in the search for government employment, changed their names to be more like Thais.

For that matter, in Singapore, the recent furore over the tudung in school shows the authorities do not have much tolerance for racial or religious minorities.

In Malaysia, by contrast, from the very start, policy-making has always been tied to the effort to accommodate all races. The practice of give-and-take has almost become an ideology.

As such, protests on the English issue from the usual suspects, the Chinese educationist groups Jiao Zhong, Dong Zhong and the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall are not particularly surprising, even though it is not pretty.

The thrust of their argument is that teaching the subjects in English instead of Mandarin as at present, will change the character of Chinese schools.

The views were parroted by MCA secretary-general Datuk Seri Dr Ting Chew Peh.

Federation of Peninsular Malay Students president Datuk Suhaimi Ibrahim was among the first to react. As expected, he reacted emotionally, calling for the retraction of the 10 per cent offer to non-Malays in the MRSM. But such outbursts will not solve the problem, though they could make Suhaimi more popular among the Malays.

As for the leaders of Chinese parties in the BN, they chose to be non-committal, suggesting the matter be debated further. Their worry about losing electoral support if they took any other stand was plain for all to see.

However, Exco member of the Young Women's Christian Association of Malaysia (YWCA) Tai Sim Yew shared a thoughtful insight:

"Mastering of English will open the window to a better and prosperous world for mankind.

"Our basic character is Malaysian regardless of whatever category or label we come under or call ourselves. So it does not change our character at all by teaching Science and Mathematics in a different language.

"Whether we wear a three-piece suit, or a baju kebaya or a cheongsam or a sari, we are still Malaysians."

A Singaporean, who has become a naturalised Malaysian, said that sometimes the Government has to be firm in dealing with education policies in nation building:

"In the republic, they introduced the integrated schools concept to break up the vernacular schools. English became the main language while other languages were allowed.

"You can't have a parallel education system just to accommodate each racial group forever. It will never build a nation."

Actually, this debate has similarities with the earlier one on Vision Schools.

In fact, the political repercussions too could be similar, and if any party is at risk, it is Umno and its partners.

The Lunas by-election is an example. Chinese voters decided to favour the Opposition when the Vision Schools concept was used as a campaign tool.

The equation is simple.

Umno, in pushing for changes which affects the Malays, has to contend with the risk of Pas taking the opportunity to woo the disgruntled Malays.

Then, if MCA and Gerakan are seen as ineffective in fighting for Chinese concerns, will the community vote for the Opposition too?

It does not mean the Chinese support the Opposition. It is merely a way of teaching BN a lesson for ignoring matters dear to their hearts, especially education.

A Chinese colleague who supports the use of English in the two subjects in vernacular schools said:

"If the BN is not careful, this issue may even neutralise the Chinese concerns over the Sept 11 terrorist attacks on the US and Pas' over-zealous pursuits of hudud."

He may disagree with the views of the Chinese groups that oppose the move, but his remarks cannot be ignored. Umno and BN must factor this sentiment into their calculations.

Their choice is pretty limited.

They can go ahead and push these policies, from usage of English to the Vision Schools, and take the risk of becoming unpopular and perhaps suffer an electoral setback.

So if lack of proficiency in English is the concern, they may just decide to make the subject compulsory in all exams so that students will be required to pass it to continue with their education, just like Bahasa Melayu.

The other choice is to be populist, please all races and allow each to live in its own comfort zone without making an effort to break down racial barriers.

The real problem here, however, is the inability of some BN politicians to sell a policy that is supposed to be good for the nation. And their lack of skill chills the marrow.